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# **Beyond Language: an Ethnographic Study of Language Planning and Policy in the Yangon Deaf Community**

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## **Abstract**

In 2007 the Myanmar government made a decision to standardise the country's two sign languages, Yangon Sign Language and Mandalay Sign Language. The project was initiated without community consultation. While this paternalistic approach to sign language planning and policy is widespread, there is a paucity of academic research that explores deaf people's responses to policy making.

This study presents an ethnographic account of language planning and policy (LPP) in the Yangon deaf community, giving visibility and voice to deaf people. LPP is examined at different levels, demonstrating the complex and dynamic interactions between language policy in education, unofficial community language policy and top-down attempts at standardisation. Experiences of language use in school are shown to shape unofficial LPP in the community, influencing language ideologies and linguistic practices, as well as wider beliefs regarding language, equality and citizenship. The study also highlights the agency of the community, demonstrating how participants negotiate, and subvert, official LPP by constructing their own unofficial policy towards the standardised language in accordance with their ideologies, interests and agendas.

Throughout the thesis, attention is drawn to the need for LPP research to go 'beyond language' and adopt an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand more completely the implications and outcomes of LPP. The findings also contribute to ongoing scholarly debate regarding the interplay between LPP and social justice. It is suggested that a more critical approach is required, one that questions the assumed moral imperative of interventions such as mother-tongue education and language rights.

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction to the Thesis**

## **1.1 Introduction**

In 2007 the Myanmar government made a decision to unify the country's two sign languages, Yangon Sign Language (YSL) and Mandalay Sign Language (MSL). The standardisation project that followed was launched without consulting the communities in question or conducting any sociolinguistic research. Indeed, the standardisation of signed languages is widespread globally and most often initiated by hearing professionals and implemented with little community involvement (Adam, 2015; Eichmann, 2009; Reagan, 2010).

This study presents a deaf-centred account of language planning and policy (LPP) in the Yangon deaf community and aims to give visibility and voice to deaf people and other community stakeholders. Working from the perspective that LPP is a dynamic socio-cultural and political process (McCarty, 2011a) the study adopts a critical ethnographic methodology in order to explore community responses to standardisation and examine how this top-down policy interacts with unofficial local-level LPP. Accordingly, the research findings are presented over three chapters: Language in Education Policy at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf; Unofficial Community Language Planning and Policy; and Community Responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project.

This introductory chapter presents the rationale behind this study and makes a case for conducting critical ethnographic LPP research in deaf communities. Attention is then given to my positionality as a researcher, including a description of my academic background that led me to conduct research in the Yangon deaf community. Finally, the aims and objectives of the study are stated, followed by an overview of the thesis structure. A brief note on disciplinary writing conventions is also included.



## 1.2. Rationale

Language standardisation is most often framed as a necessary intervention, aimed at facilitating inter-group interaction and promoting a cohesive national or community identity (see Blommaert, 1996; Sallabank, 2010; Sebba, 2007). This applies to both top-down and grass roots initiatives; as Grenoble and Whaley (2006) note, language revitalisation efforts tend to regard linguistic standardisation as a means of strengthening community relations as well as a pre-requisite for introducing the language into new domains, such as formal education. However, while language planners have typically treated standardisation as a wholly pragmatic endeavour, Sebba (2007) points out that this model conceals the ideological nature of the process as well as its social consequences. Indeed, language standardisation has been widely criticised by anthropologists and sociolinguists for marginalising speakers who do not conform to the standard variety and for diminishing linguistic diversity (see Austin and Sallabank, 2014; Murchadha, 2016). As Sallabank (2010) observes, standardisation can lead to long-standing disputes and tension within communities (see also Grenoble and Whaley, 2006).

Attempts to standardise sign languages are often opposed by deaf communities (Adam, 2015). Likewise, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) (2014, n.p.) states that it ‘does not support any formal standardisation activities related to any sign language’, expressing concern that standardisation diminishes the natural richness of sign languages and has the potential to alienate communities. For Reagan (2010) sign language planning and policy is especially paternalistic, a pattern that may be attributed to enduring misconceptions regarding the nature of sign languages and their association with disability (Turner, 2009). While sign language research has developed as an academic discipline over the last half century<sup>1</sup>, it remains a relatively new field of study, whose findings have not yet permeated wider society (Adam, 2015). For example, Ethnologue (2017) currently lists a

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<sup>1</sup> The academic study of sign languages emerged following Stokoe’s (1960) seminal research demonstrating the phonological structure of signs.

total of 142 sign languages worldwide<sup>2</sup>, yet it is widely assumed amongst the general public that there is just a single universal sign language (Schembri, 2010). Paradoxically, another persistent misconception is that sign languages constitute a physical representation of the surrounding spoken language (Schembri, 2010; Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999). In fact, sign languages and spoken languages are typically distinct in their grammar, morphology and vocabulary (see Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999). Notably, in sign languages, the physical space around the signer can be exploited for grammatical purposes and linguistic contributions are also expressed through non-manual features (movements of the face, head, shoulders and trunk of the body) to produce morphologically complex signs<sup>3</sup>.

Despite the prevalence of sign language standardisation projects globally there is a notable paucity of academic research in this area. Furthermore, the existing body of literature tends to present descriptive overviews of top-down standardisation programmes, as opposed to empirical, community-based studies (for example, see the 2015 special issue of the *Journal of Sign Language Studies*, entitled ‘Language Planning and Sign Language Rights’, which presents a rich selection of articles describing and analysing top-down policy, but no community-based accounts). Indeed, my review of the literature revealed just two studies of standardisation that include the perspectives of deaf people, with only one of these adopting an ethnographic methodology (see Eichmann, 2009; Hoffmann-Dilloway, 2008 respectively). In contrast, there is a growing body of ethnographic literature that examines LPP in spoken language contexts (see, for example, *Ethnography and Language Policy*, McCarty, 2011). Indeed, for Hornberger and Johnson (2011), ethnography is uniquely suited to the study of LPP, illuminating stakeholder interactions and demonstrating the role of community language ideologies in shaping

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<sup>2</sup> It is notable that none of Myanmar’s sign languages are included in this list. This omission suggests that the actual number of sign languages in the world may be significantly higher. Conversely, it is also possible that the figure cited in *Ethnologue* is an overestimate; certain sign languages may be more accurately described as dialects of American Sign Language (ASL), due to contact with this globally dominant sign language (see, for example, Woodward (1996) on Thai Sign Language and ASL). The problematic nature of enumerating languages is discussed further in section 3.5.1.

<sup>3</sup> The exact grammatical function of space remains a topic of debate amongst sign language linguists (see Emmorey and Reilly, 2015). Furthermore, it should be noted that the visual sensory modality also plays a role in spoken language, with speakers drawing on gesture and other body movements during face-to-face communication (see Fricke, 2013).

LPP outcomes and the way in which participants interpret and negotiate top-down policy. As Martin-Jones (2011, p. 232) states, ethnographic research into LPP offers an opportunity to ‘illuminate the consequences for those most closely involved’.

The lack of ethnographic LPP research conducted in deaf communities is a concerning omission, denying a voice to communities and failing to account for local language ideologies and their influence on LPP outcomes. This is problematic from both an ethical and an academic perspective. A lack of engagement with community ideologies and perspectives, and a reliance instead on dominant disciplinary ideologies and assumptions, presents a clear obstacle to academically rigorous research and the development of more sophisticated and representative theoretical understandings of language issues (see Eira and Stebbins, 2008; Stebbins, 2014). As Heller and Martin-Jones (2001) state with regards to the study of language in education, ethnographic analysis across a wide range of settings is essential for substantive theory building.

There is, therefore, a clear ethical and political imperative for conducting ethnographic LPP research within deaf communities. Accordingly, the present study of LPP in the Yangon deaf community locates itself specifically within the field of critical ethnography, defined by Thomas (1993, p. 4) as ‘conventional ethnography with a political purpose’. For Madison (2012, p. 5), critical ethnography begins with a ‘responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice in particular *lived* domains’. This is significant in the context of top-down language standardisation, given its potential social ramifications and implications for social justice. However, Madison argues that research must go further, attending to the voices and experiences of marginalised subjects with a view to potentially disrupting hegemonic assumptions and epistemologies (see also Jaffe, 2011). Indeed, for Hornberger and Johnson (2011) this objective gives critical ethnographic studies of LPP an inherent capacity for social justice. By adopting this methodology and prioritising deaf people’s perspectives and experiences of LPP, this study not only fills the current gap in the literature, but also pushes disciplinary boundaries, raising new questions and bringing alternative perspectives to the scholarly forum.

### 1.3. Positionality

Over the last four years I have often been asked what led me, a white British hearing researcher, to study sign language in Myanmar. This question typically arises in the context of small talk and I have grown accustomed to giving a relatively brief account of my interest in the topic. Yet it highlights my social distance from the topic of the research and thus warrants deeper reflection. As Madison (2012) states, researching ‘Others’ is a complicated, contentious and inherently political activity. As such, she considers an examination of researcher positionality to be a vital component of critical ethnography, forcing an acknowledgement of ‘our own power, privilege, and biases’ (Madison, 2012, p. 8). In this way, working reflexively can help to ensure that findings are transparent, accountable and open to judgment (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Thomas, 1993).

Reflexivity is particularly important given my status as a hearing person. As Sutton-Spence and West (2011) note, the predominance of hearing researchers in the field of Deaf Studies is potentially problematic. For Kusters et al. (2017) this pattern of hearing hegemony must be understood within the broader socio-political context of unequal power relations between the hearing majority and the deaf minority (see also O’Brien and Emery, 2014). In recognition of this I spent a great deal of time reflecting on my hearing privilege and how this might impact the research process (this is discussed further in Chapter 4). As Kusters et al. (2017, p. 23) state, ‘hearing researchers do not need to defend their doing Deaf Studies work per se, but it’s vital that they think and write about their positionalities’.

While the importance of researchers examining their social identity and personal perspectives has tended to dominate discussions on positionality, Davies (2008) argues that attention should also be given to disciplinary traditions and their influence on the research process. This goal is particularly pertinent to critical ethnography, given its concern for deconstructing hegemonic epistemologies. In the following section I further locate myself in this research project by briefly describing my academic background and reflecting on my personal interest in the research topic. While this section aims to clarify my position in the research, it should be noted that reflexivity permeated every aspect of

the study. As Davies (2008) states, a critical self-consciousness should guide the research from start to end.

### **1.3.1. Deaf Studies and sign language**

My interest in sign language was first sparked during my early twenties when I worked with a number of deaf colleagues who used British Sign Language (BSL) as their first language. Having attended a BSL evening course, I was inspired to learn more about sign language and the deaf community and so enrolled on the Deaf Studies degree course at the University of Bristol<sup>4</sup>. Over the next three years I studied BSL alongside a range of modules, from the Sociolinguistics of Sign Languages to Sign Language Poetry and Performance. I also came to view deaf sign language users as members of a cultural-linguistic minority rather than a disability group; as Kusters et al. (2017) note, the discipline of Deaf Studies has consistently challenged the medical model of deafness and its focus on audiological impairment and physical deficiency, and the cultural-linguistic model is now accepted within the discipline and in many deaf communities (see also Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992; Padden and Humphries, 1988; Woodward, 1972).

### **1.3.2. Endangered language studies**

Upon graduating from the Centre for Deaf Studies I embarked on a Masters Degree in Language Support and Revitalisation, at SOAS, University of London. This course offered me the chance to explore the politics of minority and endangered languages in greater depth and consider sign language issues from an alternative and complementary disciplinary perspective. During the course I also developed new interests in language planning and policy and language ideologies. In particular, the discipline's activist tradition and emphasis on social justice appealed to me. Much like Deaf Studies, which Kusters et al. (2017) describe as being 'inherently political', the study of endangered languages is focused on highlighting and challenging linguistic and cultural oppression. It was this combination of interests that prompted me to embark on this research project and

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<sup>4</sup> The Centre for Deaf studies at the University of Bristol was closed in 2013 due to funding cuts. As Kusters et al. (2017) state, this was a significant loss to the field of Deaf Studies.

study the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project<sup>5</sup> and LPP in the Yangon deaf community.

#### **1.4. Aim and objectives**

This chapter has noted the prevalence of sign language standardisation projects, while also highlighting the typically high levels of community opposition towards this linguistic intervention. However, a dearth of research into sign language standardisation limits understanding of this process and demonstrates a pressing need for more ethnographic LPP studies which attend to the experiences and perspectives of deaf communities. The aim of this study, therefore, is to produce a comprehensive and critical ethnographic analysis of language planning and policy in the Yangon deaf community. This will be achieved through the following objectives:

- To critically review the current literature as it relates to language planning and policy and other key themes of this research.
- To demonstrate the benefits of an ethnographic approach to LPP research.
- To examine unofficial language policy in the Yangon deaf community, including community language ideologies and linguistic practices.
- To explore community responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project and the interaction between this official top-down policy and unofficial community policies.
- To consider the potential implications of sign language standardisation for the Yangon deaf community.

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<sup>5</sup> I came to hear about the Myanmar Sign Language Standardization Project during my MA studies, when I met with one of my now supervisors Professor Justin Watkins, a linguist and Burmese language scholar who had recently come into contact with the deaf community in Yangon.

- To consider the wider theoretical significance of my findings, the way in which they contribute to scholarly debate and their implications for research methodology and policy implementation.

## **1.5. Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is organised into eight chapters, including this introduction.

Chapter two presents information regarding Myanmar's social, political and historical background, setting the scene for the study. An historical analysis of language planning and policy in the country is presented, which makes reference to key events in Myanmar's modern history. Issues relating to sign language and deafness are then presented. This includes information on the Yangon deaf community and the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf; an historical overview of language in education policy at the school; and details of the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project.

Chapter three offers a comprehensive review of the academic LPP literature as it relates to key themes in this project. The discussion draws attention to the ideological and political nature of LPP. The chapter culminates in a critical review of mother-tongue education and the language rights paradigm that currently dominates scholarly discourse on linguistic equality and social justice.

Chapter four presents the research methodology, outlining the epistemological and ontological foundations of the study, listing the initial research questions and justifying the methodological framework. A description of the fieldwork is presented, including an account of the specific research methods employed to gather, code and analyze the data. Attention is also given to various practical and philosophical issues that arose during the research.

The following three chapters present the research findings. Chapter five comprises an analysis of language in education policy at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf. It explores teachers' attitudes towards the use of Yangon Sign Language (YSL) in the classroom and describes some of the challenges they face. The discussion then focuses on the strategies employed in order to overcome these challenges and describes how these tactics feed into a broader transformative pedagogy, triggering a new deaf cultural politics in the school.

Chapter six offers a detailed analysis of unofficial LPP in the deaf community. In order to contextualise the findings, the chapter begins with an account of deaf participants' life histories and their experiences of social inclusion and language choices across a range of institutions. Attention is then given to community language ideologies, which are shown to form the basis of prescriptive statements regarding community language use. The findings also point to certain ideological cleavages in the deaf community, most often drawn along intergenerational lines and reflecting distinct educational experiences and views on equality. Finally, the chapter describes a lack of language rights discourse in the deaf community and presents some possible reasons for this, examining alternative grass-roots models of linguistic equality.

Chapter seven explores participants' responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project and relates these to the findings presented in the previous two chapters. It begins by examining teachers' responses to the project and the extent to which they have adopted the standardised language in the classroom. Deaf people's responses to the standardised language are then considered. These are shown to be complex and diverse, as participants negotiate the various possible outcomes of standardisation in relation to their values, ideologies and aspirations.

Chapter eight concludes the thesis by reflecting on the study's key research findings, their wider theoretical significance and their implications for research methodology and policy implementation. The limitations of the study are considered, along with potential avenues for further research.



## **1.6. A note on models of deafness and written conventions: the Deaf/deaf distinction**

In contrast to the medical model of deafness, the cultural-linguistic model (mentioned briefly in section 1.3.1.) focuses on the intrinsic value of sign language and the cultural identity of the deaf community, drawing parallels between deaf sign language users and other linguistic minority groups (e.g. see Batterbury et al., 2007). From this perspective, membership in the deaf community is not determined by audiological status, but by cultural self-identification and use of a shared sign language (James and Woll, 2004).

Accordingly, it has become customary within the Deaf Studies literature to use upper case ‘Deaf’ when signaling cultural and linguistic affiliation, and lower case ‘deaf’ when referring to the audiological condition of deafness (first introduced by Markowicz and Woodward, 1978). However, while this study works from the cultural-linguistic model of deafness, the Deaf/deaf convention is not adhered to in this thesis. As Kusters et al. (2017) observe, this dichotomy risks oversimplifying complex identities and is potentially divisive. Similarly, Kisch (2007) argues that while the binary Deaf/ deaf distinction is conceptually significant, it is unable to do justice to the multiple experiences of deafness. For this reason, in recent years, a number of researchers have decided not to follow this practice (see, for example, Friedner, 2017; Kusters et al., 2017; Nakamura, 2006; Woodward and Horejes, 2016). Indeed, Woodward himself points out that the Deaf/deaf distinction was only ever intended as a heuristic for highlighting alternative experiences of deafness beyond the medical model. Noting the widespread adoption of the convention, he expresses concern that it risks promoting ‘rigid and static notions of what being deaf means’ (Woodward and Horejes, 2016, p. 285).

Furthermore, while it is customary for proper nouns to be capitalised in the English language, Kusters et al. (2017) note that this orthographic feature makes little sense in other linguistic contexts. This is certainly true in the Burmese language, in which capitalisation does not exist. In such cases, Kusters et al. (2017) believe that applying the Deaf/deaf label would be paternalistic. Instead, they argue that researchers should acknowledge deaf ways of being in local community contexts without imposing top-

down concepts and theories (see also Friedner, 2017). For the above reasons I use lowercase ‘deaf’ throughout the thesis<sup>6</sup>. The context will convey whether the term denotes biological deafness, cultural deafness, or something in-between.

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<sup>6</sup> In this thesis capitalized ‘Deaf’ will still be used when referring to the discipline of Deaf Studies or to organizational names.

## **Chapter 2: Social, Political and Historical Context**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This study was conducted at a critical juncture in Myanmar's history, during a time of unprecedented freedom and political openness. Indeed, fieldwork was concluded in September 2015, just two months before the country went to the polls in the first free and fair democratic elections in over fifty years. As such, I was able to engage with participants in a way that would likely have been impossible a few years earlier, when the country was still under military rule. This chapter places the research in its social, political and historical context, setting the scene of the study and facilitating a more comprehensive understanding of the findings and their wider significance.

The chapter is divided into two sections. The first describes ethno-linguistic diversity in Myanmar before charting key events in the country's modern history by means of a concise historical analysis of official language policy. Covering the colonial era (from 1824) to present day, the discussion draws attention to the politics of language in Myanmar, demonstrating how successive governments have mobilised language policy in response to political events, consistently seeking to suppress linguistic diversity in order to further their own political agenda.

The second half of the chapter focuses on issues relating to deafness and sign language in Myanmar. Demographic information is presented, followed by an overview of sign languages and deaf education through out the country. Attention is then focused on the Yangon deaf community, Yangon Sign Language and, in particular, the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf, where much of this research was conducted. Finally, the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project is described, with an overview of the standardisation process and an account of the motivations and outcomes of the project.

## 2.2. Myanmar or Burma?

Before beginning the chapter proper it is worth taking a moment to explain the decision to use the country name 'Myanmar' as opposed to 'Burma' in this thesis.

In 1989, shortly after the brutal suppression of pro-democracy demonstrations (see section 2.4.4), the ruling military junta changed the official name of the country from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar'. This proved highly divisive and pro-democracy groups in the country refused to acknowledge the change of nomenclature. As Watkins (2007) notes, those who did use 'Myanmar' were labeled as 'pro-government' and 'anti-democratic'. Internationally, the name 'Myanmar' only ever received partial acceptance. While some countries officially recognised the change, others including the UK, USA and Australia, continued to refer to the country as 'Burma', in what Steinberg (2013) describes as a demonstration of solidarity with the country's National League for Democracy (NLD).

While the change from 'Burma' to 'Myanmar' provoked widespread controversy, Callahan (2007) notes that opinions within the country have begun to soften, with 'Myanmar' gaining much higher levels of acceptance and usage amongst the general population. In particular, Callahan points out that the name 'Myanmar' is favoured by many non-Burman ethnic groups, who consider it to be more inclusive than 'Burma'. During my time in Yangon the majority of people I came into contact with referred to the country as 'Myanmar' and expressed a preference for this name. This usage had no apparent political connotations. In fact, most of these people were openly critical of the military regime. The decision to use the name Myanmar in this thesis was made in recognition of these local naming practices. The terms 'Burman' and 'Burmese' refer specifically to the ethnic majority and their language.

### 2.3. Introducing Myanmar

Myanmar is the largest country by area in mainland Southeast Asia, sharing borders with India, Bangladesh, China, Laos and Thailand. Fieldwork for this research was conducted in the former capital Yangon<sup>7</sup>, situated in Lower Myanmar (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Map of Myanmar (Nations Online Project, 2017).



<sup>7</sup> In 2004 the government relocated to the purpose built capital city of Naypyidaw, 350 km north of Yangon (previously known as Rangoon). However, Yangon remains the country's largest city and commercial capital.

Burmese is the official language of Myanmar and is the first language of the Burman ethnic majority, who comprise roughly 70% of the population and reside primarily in the central lowlands and delta area. A high degree of ethno-linguistic diversity exists amongst the remaining 30% of the population, yet a lack of reliable data means that there is little consensus regarding the total number of ethnic groups or languages. While official government sources refer to 135 ‘national races’, this figure has been widely contested by both scholars and ethnic groups, who regard it as a relic from surveys conducted by the British in the 1930s and largely unrepresentative of ethnic diversity in the country (see, for example, Gravers, 2007; Holliday, 2010; Watkins, 2007). As Aye and Sercombe (2014) assert, the colonial approach to ethnic classification was crude, overlooking the fluidity of ethnic identities and the complexity of the sociolinguistic landscape. The government’s decision to use this list of ethnicities in the 2014 census provoked discontent amongst respondents, who complained that it did not allow them to represent their ethnic identity accurately. Notably, at the time of writing, more than a year after the first census results were released<sup>8</sup>, findings on ethnicity remain unpublished amidst fears that the politically sensitive nature of this data could fuel further ethnic conflict in the country (Holland, 2014; Palatino, 2014).

There is also little consensus regarding the number of languages used in Myanmar, with estimates varying drastically. For example, while Bradley (cited in Watkins, 2007) puts the total at 71, Ethnologue (2017) lists 118. Notably, neither of these figures account for the existence of signed languages. The lack of official linguistic surveying in post-independence Myanmar is perhaps unsurprising given that language issues have long represented a source of tension between ethnic minorities and the predominantly Burman government. As Watkins (2007) notes, Myanmar’s governments have consistently sought to minimise rather than highlight diversity in the country, as part of an ongoing political project to foster national unity (this is described in greater detail in the following sections). For this reason, Callahan (2003) points out that surveying languages in Myanmar is not only logistically challenging but also politically sensitive.

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<sup>8</sup> Preliminary census results were released in August 2014. The main census results were released in May 2015.

## **2.4. The politics of language in Myanmar**

In order to explain the politically contentious and inflammatory nature of language in Myanmar, this section presents a brief historical analysis of language planning and policy in the country, from colonialism to present day. It should be noted that issues relating to language are often sidelined in studies of political upheaval (Lo Bianco, 2016). Certainly, very little scholarly work has studied the relationship between language and conflict in Myanmar (South and Lall, 2016). As the following analysis demonstrates, this omission represents a significant oversight and a failure to account for one of the key factors underlying ethnic tension and conflict in the country.

### **2.4.1. Language at the time of independence**

In 1886 Myanmar came under full British rule when the last Burman king was deposed by British and Indian troops. Upon the country's annexation the British colonial government created two distinct administrative zones: the 'Ministerial Area', located in the central lowlands, and the 'Frontier Areas', located peripherally along the country's borders. During the colonial period these two zones had little contact. The Ministerial Area was home to the Burman majority and was the administrative and political centre of the country. In contrast, the ethnically diverse Frontier Areas were largely overlooked by the British government and were typically governed by pre-existing local power structures (Thomson, 1995). While schools in these border regions continued to teach in local languages, English became the official language in the Ministerial Area and, as such, was used in education and government administration.

This policy was initially popular amongst Burmans in the Ministerial Area, who considered that mastery of English would afford them greater economic prospects (Callahan, 2003). However, by the start of the twentieth century many members of the Burman elite had started to challenge colonial rule, with language emerging as a primary tool of resistance in the struggle for independence that took place during the 1930s and 1940s (Watkins, 2007). This movement was led predominantly by the Dobama Asiayone (We Burmans Association) who placed a strong emphasis on promoting Burmese language and culture in order to reverse the hegemony of English and undermine the

influence of British rule (Watkins, 2007). Burmese language and literature became imbued with symbolic value during this process of national reform, as demonstrated in the following poem, first published in the Dobama Asiayone's political magazine and later used as the national anthem:

*Burma is our country.  
Burmese literature is our literature.  
Burmese language is our language.  
Love our land.  
Praise our country.  
Respect our language.*

(Cited in Watkins, 2007, p. 27)

#### **2.4.2. Language policy in the decade after independence**

Myanmar gained independence in 1948, at which point the Ministerial and Frontier Areas were incorporated into a single political entity, presided over by the predominantly Burman AFPFL (Anti Fascist People's Freedom League). As Walton (2013, p. 9) notes, Myanmar's independence was achieved 'under the auspices of Burman nationalism', with little regard for ethnic minorities and their languages. Indeed, the country has subsequently been referred to as an ethnocratic state, in which assimilation to the dominant culture is required for full societal and political participation (see Brown, 2004). Certainly, the AFPFL was highly committed to promoting Burmese as the national language and embarked on a range of language modernisation efforts upon coming into power (Callahan, 2003). For example, the Burma Translation Society, founded in 1948, produced a wide range of translated educational texts, as well as numerous dictionaries and encyclopedias for distribution around the country, with the aim of increasing 'general reading habits in Burmese' (Watkins, 2007, p. 272). While Burmese was not forced on ethnic minorities during this period, its newly found official status, as enshrined in the 1947 Constitution of the Union of Burma, afforded it a level of prestige not available to minority languages (Callahan, 2003). Indeed, as Callahan (2003) and Watkins (2007) note, the promotion of Burmese language and culture was troubling for ethnic groups, who perceived it as a threat to their own languages and cultures. Consequently, many



started to fear political, cultural and linguistic Burmanisation (Callahan, 2003; Watkins, 2007).

Given that ethnic minorities in the former frontier areas had little contact with the Burman majority prior to independence and had enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, there was no particular sense of attachment to Burmese language or culture amongst these groups. For this reason, the government's vigorous promulgation of a Burman ethnic national identity, including the decision to elevate Burmese to 'official' language status, did little to aid integration (Thomson, 1995). In fact, it appeared to deepen divisions between ethnic minorities and the Burman majority. By the late 1950s numerous armed separatist movements had emerged seeking greater autonomy and in some cases independence. The Federal Movement was also established at this time, comprising a united front of ethnic minorities who collectively sought political and economic devolution (Callahan, 2003). As Watkins (2007) and Aye and Sercombe (2014) assert, the cultural and linguistic marginalisation of minority groups that occurred under the new Burman government laid the foundations for decades of insurgency and intractable internal conflict.

#### **2.4.3. From 1962 to 1988: Language policy and the military junta**

Rising ethnic tensions, intra-parliamentary struggles, and a failing economy characterised the first ten years after independence. A temporary military government headed by General Ne Win assumed power in 1958, with the stated aim of restoring political order to the country. This 'caretaker' government ruled until 1960, at which point civilian power was restored. In March 1962, however, the military seized power permanently following a coup d'état led by Ne Win's Burmese Socialist Programme Party (BSPP). The BSPP dissolved parliament and declared a new national political ideology: The Burmese Way to Socialism. A socialist economy, Ne Win argued, would remove the potential for exploitation, abuse and infighting that had undermined the previous democratic parliamentary system. However, while socialism was lauded as an antidote to the country's problems and the key to fostering national unity, the country was instead plunged into five decades of dictatorship, isolation and decline.

The military junta banned all political parties and expelled foreigners, working tirelessly to purge the country of any influence that might oppose their socialist policy. In May 1962 the regime dissolved university councils in Yangon and Mandalay and assumed authority over them in the name of ‘moral reintegration’ (Charney, 2009, p. 117). A particular concern had been the teaching of Politics courses, which the government regarded as an unwelcome and threatening foreign influence. One hundred students were killed in the ensuing protests and the Yangon Student Union building was destroyed by the military. As Charney (2009, p. 116) states, these actions demonstrated the brutality and despotism of the military junta, confirming that it ‘saw itself as rooted in a tradition other than the Burmese national struggle’. The media was also bought under state control, with censorship boards established to ensure that all publications were consistent with socialist principles and national traditions. These laws effectively put an end to the publication of works in minority languages, which were now translated into Burmese and submitted to a strict censorship process (Allott, 1993; Callahan, 2003).

As Callahan (2003) states, the regime was not fundamentally opposed to the existence of diverse ethnic identities in the country. Rather, their most pressing concern was that everyone in Myanmar should identify primarily as a socialist. Nevertheless, the promotion of this ideology had a significant and negative impact on ethnic minority languages. Crucially, the Burmese language was the sole vehicle for disseminating the regime’s socialist ideology and was thus promoted vigorously. Accordingly, Burmese literacy classes were established around the country, although as Callahan (2003) notes, it took well over a decade for these programmes to reach the border regions. The regime also continued with the previous government’s policy of language modernisation, embarking on a process of standardisation so that Burmese could efficiently function as the language of the ‘state, power and modernity’ (Callahan, 2003, p. 161). Meanwhile, minority languages came to be regarded as a threat to the socialist imperative of national unity. As Lehman wrote in 1967, “[a]dherence to a minority cultural tradition is treated as tantamount to subversion of the nation and is branded as a mark of group inferiority within the nation.” (cited in Holliday, 2014, p. 411). While the military junta permitted after-school classes in minority languages on the condition that they did not negatively

impact national unity, school instruction in ethnic languages was prohibited beyond Grade 4 (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007).

#### **2.4.4. From 1988 to 2010: The drive for a homogenous national identity**

Myanmar's economy further deteriorated under Ne Win's socialist regime and in 1987 the sudden demonetisation of certain banknotes financially crippled the country, wiping out the life savings of the majority of the population (Haseman, 1988). Mass anti-government protests and pro-democracy demonstrations ensued and in July 1988 U Ne Win resigned, precipitating the collapse of the BSPP. Protests continued until September of that year when a bloody military crackdown resulted in an estimated 3000 civilian deaths (Charney, 2009). At this point the military resumed direct control of the country and established the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), later renamed the State Peace and Development Council in 1997 (SPDC), a change that observers widely regarded as superficial. Initially the military stated that it did not 'wish to cling to State power for long', claiming that it would maintain law and order until democratic multi-party elections could be held (cited in Guyot, 1991, p. 205). On May 27<sup>th</sup> 1990 the country went to the polls, with the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, winning an overwhelming majority of seats. Yet, the election results were not honored and the military junta retained control of the country, placing Aung Sang Suu Kyi under house arrest where she remained until 1995.

The SLORC/ SDPC viewed the 1988 uprising as a product of national disunity and became fixated on promoting cultural purity. A relentless and uncompromising programme of nation building followed, with various propaganda campaigns aimed at creating a common sense of identity. Callahan (2003, p. 167) describes how the junta fabricated an alternative history for the country, describing 'a sacred and ancient history of a singular national race called the "Myanmar"'. In 1989, in order to emphasise this shared ethnic 'Myanmar' identity, and demonstrate greater inclusivity, the military renamed the country 'Myanmar'<sup>9</sup>. Many place names around the country were also

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<sup>9</sup> As Allot and Okell (2001) explain, the words 'Burma' and 'Myanmar' in fact share the same etymology.

changed to reflect Burmese pronunciations. While this was allegedly aimed at eliminating the vestiges of British rule, Watkins (2007) notes that colonial era surveyors, who had inscribed the pre-existing place names in writing, had done so on the basis of pronunciations in local (non-Burmese) languages. For this reason he suggests that the junta's decision to replace local toponyms with Burmese substitutes was not motivated solely by a desire to cleanse the country of British influences; it also represented an act of ethnic chauvinism and an attempt to impose unity and order on the border regions through Burmese language dominance.

Over the next twenty years the SLORC/ SPDC continued with its campaign to enforce a common national identity, resulting in increasingly assimilationist policies aimed at achieving cultural and linguistic homogeneity. Notably, after-school ethnic language classes were no longer permitted (Callahan, 2007). While ethnic groups were allowed to promote their own language and culture in private, the government provided no assistance for this (Kyaw Yin Hlaing, 2007). Moreover, with the State suppressing any behaviour that they deemed to be subversive, many privately run ethnic language associations were closed down, with teachers arrested on suspicion of preaching anti-government sentiments (Lall, 2016).

Burmanisation also occurred in a more insidious manner under the SLORC/ SPDC. As Callahan (2007) notes, the regime came to regard the ethnically diverse border regions as a genuine threat to stability. Consequently, after decades of neglect, the military established an elaborate development programme in previously rebel-held areas, with hospitals, power plants, telecommunication stations and Burmese language schools constructed at an unprecedented rate (Callahan, 2007; Jones, 2014). Yet with the army becoming actively involved in the everyday lives of minority groups, Walton (2013) argues that these programmes served to further subjugate ethnic minorities. As Callahan (2007) explains, people had to operate in the Burmese language in order to communicate with the Burman soldiers who controlled access to these much-needed new amenities. To this extent, ethnic groups in the border regions tended to view these programmes as military expansionism and a form of internal colonialism (Callahan, 2007; Jones, 2014).

The Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project, initiated in 2007 towards the end of the SPDC's time in power, was a notable example of the government's drive for unity. The details of this project are discussed in section 2.13 of this chapter.

#### **2.4.5. From 2010 to 2015: The transition to democracy**

On November 7th 2010 the first elections for twenty years were held, marking a critical juncture in the country's history. Led by U Thein Sein, the quasi-civilian, yet military-backed, Union Solidary Development Party (USDP) took office and pledged to embark on a programme of national reform aimed ultimately at transitioning the country to democracy<sup>10</sup>. It should be noted that international observers did not consider the 2010 elections to be free or fair, with high registration fees barring many political parties from standing, as well as reports of corruption, including the manipulation of postal votes and the intimidation of voters (see Rogers, 2012; Turnell, 2011). Yet, as Holliday (2014, p. 405) describes, the following five-year term was 'marked by an openness inconceivable in the dark days of military dominance'. There was a feeling among the general population that politics had become an acceptable topic for public discussion, despite widespread discontent at the election results (Lall, 2016). Moreover, between 2010-2015 the USDP did indeed initiate a series of political reforms aimed at liberalising and modernising the country.

Although the process of reform has been somewhat inconsistent, Farrelly (2016) notes that the changes have at least partially restored the country's international image. During their term in office the USDP agreed ceasefires with many armed ethnic groups in the border areas, permitted the large-scale release of political prisoners, relaxed censorship laws and economic controls, and worked towards reconciliation with the NLD. Education reform was also a priority for President Thein Sein, as half a century of willful neglect and international isolation had left the school system in crisis (Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut, 2015; Lall et al., 2013). The magnitude of this is well illustrated in Lorch's damning description:

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<sup>10</sup> There is little consensus as to why the military government decided to transition to civilian rule, although see Huang (2013) and Lall (2016) for theories.

[S]chools are mostly poorly equipped and usually lack basic teaching materials such as benches, tables and textbooks. Moreover, schoolbooks and curricula tend to be outdated. Teachers are mostly poorly trained and teaching methods tend to be repetitive, outdated, teacher centred and based on ex cathedra teaching. (Lorch, 2008, p. 155)

In order to bring Myanmar's education system up to ASEAN<sup>11</sup> standards, ministerial officials in collaboration with UNICEF established the Comprehensive Educational Sector Review (CESR) in 2012. Aimed at assessing the current state of the education system and developing evidence-based policies, the CESR identified a range of priorities including an overhaul of textbooks, assessment methods, and the curriculum. Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut (2015) describe a growing interest in learner-centred teaching methods, with the 2015 National Education Sector Plan<sup>12</sup> advocating 'a move from rote learning, cramming and short term memorisation of facts to a variety of methods used more flexibly both to assess course work and the higher level thinking skills of pupils' (cited in Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut, 2015, p. 6). Nevertheless, Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut suggest that teachers overwhelmingly regard learner-centred methods as a foreign imposition, incompatible with Myanmar culture (see also Lall et al., 2013).

As Lall (2016) observes, language policy has also been considered during the process of educational reform, with the CESR commissioning a large-scale Language in Education Project, headed by Joseph Lo Bianco from the University of Melbourne. Through consultation with stakeholders, this project worked towards developing a multilingual national language policy with recommendations made for mother-tongue education<sup>13</sup>. The research culminated in a major international conference on Myanmar language

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<sup>11</sup> Myanmar joined the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1997.

<sup>12</sup> The National Education Sector Plan was produced as part of the CESR with the aim of improving achievement across the country by 2021.

<sup>13</sup> It was extremely fortuitous that the timing of my fieldwork coincided with this UNICEF project, and I was invited to contribute a report on issues relating to deaf education in Yangon, based on data collected in this project. A related workshop provided a space for teachers, interpreters and members of the deaf community to share their experiences and voice their concerns and hopes for the future.

policy, which was attended by over 380 delegates. Despite high levels of interest in the topic, Lall (2016) warns that a lack of stakeholder consensus may undermine the efficacy of educational reform; the CESR has received only limited political support and ethnic educators have been largely excluded from the general process of reform.

#### **2.4.6. A new democratic government and the future of language policy**

Aung San Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy (NLD) to a landslide victory in the 2015 election, which was held on November 8<sup>th</sup> just two months after fieldwork for this project concluded. While a prevailing sense of optimism marked this occasion, rebuilding the country represents a significant challenge and progress is likely to be slow. Moreover, the military's constitutionally guaranteed retention of 25% of parliamentary seats will further restrict the NLD's capacity to enact substantive change.

National reconciliation represents a key issue for the newly elected NLD, and in September 2016 Aung San Suu Kyi resumed peace talks with a five day Union Peace Conference. However, Kingsbury (2017) describes the ambivalence of many ethnic minority groups, who remain uncertain about the effects of new government policies. Crucially, he points out that although Suu Kyi is pro-democracy, she also takes a nationalistic stance and her party is composed primarily of ethnic Burmans. In this way, language planning and policy is likely to become a topic of particular controversy, with South and Lall (2016) suggesting that future NLD language in education policy is likely to focus on Burmese and English, rather than mother-tongue education.

### **2.5. Interim summary**

The preceding analysis has demonstrated how successive post-independence governments have mobilised the Burmese language in order to further their political agendas. Throughout Myanmar's modern history assimilationist language policy has been viewed as the key to: disassociating from British rule and securing national sovereignty; instilling socialist ideals; and enforcing cultural homogeneity and thus gaining control over armed ethnic groups.

Notably, Myanmar's governments have advocated a monolingual Burmese language policy under the precept of achieving national unity, with linguistic diversity being consistently presented as a barrier to social cohesion. Yet assimilationist language policies have in fact further marginalised and embittered minority groups, exacerbating ethnic tensions in the country. As Walton (2015) describes, the concept of 'unity' has functioned as a 'disciplining tool' in Myanmar, serving to inhibit diversity and disenfranchise those who do not conform to Burmese language and cultural values. To this extent, he describes Burmese language policy as essentially anti-democratic and an obstacle to national reconciliation.

## **2.6. Deaf communities and sign language in Myanmar**

Having examined the politics of language in Myanmar through a historical analysis of language planning and policy, the following section focuses on deafness and sign language in the country.

There is only limited data regarding deafness in Myanmar. While the 2014 Myanmar Population and Housing Census cites a 1.3% rate of 'hearing disability', this figure conflates varying degrees of hearing impairment and does not distinguish age related hearing loss from congenital or early onset deafness. Furthermore, the figure reported is noticeably low when compared to other data. For example, the World Health Organisation (2011) puts the global rate of deafness at 5.3%, with the highest prevalence found in South Asia, Asia Pacific (which includes Myanmar) and Sub Saharan Africa. Indeed, Myanmar could be expected to exceed global averages. The country's health care system remains severely underdeveloped following decades of chronic neglect (Shobert, 2014), and early onset deafness can result from diseases such as meningitis, encephalitis, malaria, measles and mumps. Moreover, around 70% of Myanmar's population reside in rural areas where access to healthcare is even further restricted. Not only is inadequate healthcare provision associated with higher rates of congenital and early onset deafness, but it may also delay diagnosis and hinder appropriate intervention. Interviews with



parents and carers of deaf children in this research project revealed that a medical diagnosis was often not made until children were 4 or 5 years of age, with negligible follow-up support. Certainly, there is a dearth of audiological provisions in Myanmar, with very few trained audiologists, a scarcity of equipment and no newborn screening programme. The majority of parents described how they first learned of the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf by chance, through word of mouth recommendations.

The World Bank (2014) notes that statistical data in Myanmar is generally of poor quality, due to limited research capacity, lack of funding and political sensitivity. One further possible explanation for the low rate of deafness reported in the Myanmar census relates to the stigmatisation of all disabilities in the country and the consequent reluctance to officially acknowledge physical impairment; the Myanmar census reports a 4.6% rate of disability, significantly lower than the 15 % global average cited by the World Bank (2016)<sup>14</sup> (the stigma of deafness and disability in Myanmar is described in more detail in Chapter 6, section 6.2.3).

The lack of reliable data regarding deafness in Myanmar is problematic. As Haualand and Allen (2009) note, accurate and comprehensive information is essential for effective community planning and targeting of services. Yet, it should be noted that this situation is in no way unique to Myanmar. For example, Nyst (2015) and Lytle et al. (2005) both comment on the challenges of obtaining reliable up-to-date statistics on deafness in Mali and China respectively. Similarly, there are no reliable estimates of the total number of deaf people in the UK, or their demographics (Office for Management, 2015).

Furthermore, Fenlon and Wilkinson (2015) point out that when national data are available, the figures are often contentious, with little clarity regarding the sources of data and no consideration being given to deaf people's language preferences.

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<sup>14</sup> Waite (2015) points out that the seemingly low rate of disability in Myanmar may be due to the way in which disability is defined within the national context. Certainly the criteria for determining disability in the Myanmar census was crude, recognising only 'hearing', 'seeing', 'walking' and 'remembering/ mental' impairment. Delays in diagnosis may also impact the number of instances that are recorded.

In section 2.3 of this chapter, the general lack of linguistic surveying in Myanmar was described. Similarly, there has been no formal linguistic enquiry documenting the existence of signed languages. Nevertheless, deaf signers in Myanmar widely agree that at least two distinct sign languages operate in the country, one in Yangon and one in Mandalay. While the degree of contrast between them has yet to be determined by lexicostatistical analysis, signers from each city report high levels of lexical variation and a lack of mutual intelligibility. The conviction that each variety represents a distinct language is illustrated by the naming practices employed by members of the deaf community, who refer to ‘Yangon Sign Language’ and ‘Mandalay Sign Language’. Notably, in response to the high level of lexical variation reported between Yangon and Mandalay, the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project was initiated in 2007 by the Myanmar government, with the aim of creating and promoting a unified sign language for use across Myanmar. This project is described in section 2.13 of this chapter.

## **2.7. Causes of regional variation in sign languages**

As Johnston (2003) notes, sign languages frequently exhibit a high degree of regional variation at the lexical level, such that there is often uncertainty as to whether varieties represent different dialects or distinct languages. Moreover, he points out that, despite a tendency to talk in terms of ‘national’ sign languages, it is not unusual for more than one to exist within a single country. For example, Woodward (2003) describes four distinct sign languages in Thailand, and three in Vietnam.

In Myanmar the location of each sign language corresponds to that of the two longest standing deaf schools in the country: the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf in Yangon, and the Mandalay School for the Deaf (see Figure 2, in section 2.9). As Woll et al. (2001) explain, the process of sign language emergence is often fundamentally linked to deaf education (see section 2.8 below for a distinct pattern of sign language development). Following the industrial revolution, the growth of large towns led to the establishment of deaf schools, which brought together previously isolated deaf individuals. This resulted in stable signing communities, each with their own unique sign language developed over

generations of peer contact; a process termed ‘schoolization’ by Quinn (2010)<sup>15</sup>. Indeed, while sign language in Yangon is most widely known as Yangon Sign Language (YSL), many members of the deaf community also refer to it as M-C SIGN<sup>16</sup> (‘Mary Chapman Sign Language’), highlighting the fundamental relationship between school and language. It is perhaps unsurprising that distinct sign languages have developed and been maintained in each region, given that the deaf schools in Yangon and Mandalay have no real contact with each other, being separated by substantial distance and overseen by different organisational bodies (see section 2.9). Notably, there is no official recognition of either sign language.

## **2.8. The possibility of ‘micro-community sign languages’ in Myanmar**

In addition to the process of schoolization, an alternative pattern of sign language development has been observed around the world, occurring within small isolated communities that are characterised by elevated rates of hereditary deafness. The sign languages that develop in this context are commonly referred to as ‘micro sign languages’ or ‘village sign languages’ (see Zeshan, 2012). Fenlon and Wilkinson (2015) refer to a worldwide total of thirteen documented micro-community sign languages, although the true figure is likely to be significantly higher. Notably, participants in this research project referred to the possible existence of micro sign languages in rural Myanmar, although opinions varied as to whether these represented stable community languages or idiosyncratic forms of home-sign - a system of gestures used within individual families (see Senghas et al., 2004).

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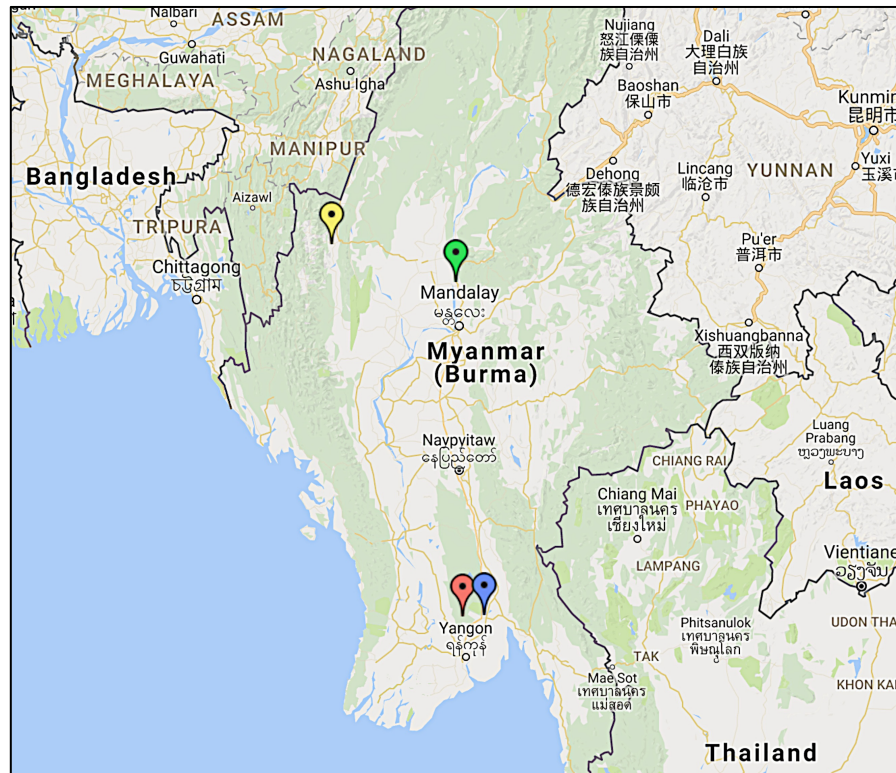
<sup>15</sup> The most recent and comprehensive account of this process of sign language emergence can be found in Kegl et al.’s (1999) documentation of the genesis of Nicaraguan sign language following the establishment of state schools in the 1970s.


<sup>16</sup> Capitalised words represent glosses of YSL signs. For the most part glosses have been avoided in this thesis, except for when referring to certain key concepts as used by deaf participants.


## 2.9. Deaf education in Myanmar

There are a total of four deaf schools in Myanmar (see Figure 2). This section gives a very brief overview of each school before providing a more detailed description of the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf, where much of this research was conducted.

Figure 2: Map showing location of deaf schools in Myanmar (Google maps, 2017).



 The Mary Chapman School for the Deaf in Yangon is described in detail in section 2.11.

 The Mandalay School for the Deaf is one of two state run deaf schools in Myanmar. Established in 1962 by a British woman, the Ministry of Social Welfare has run the school since 1978. Offering education up to Grade 4 (see section 2.11 on grade structure in Myanmar), the school has a student population of around 200.



The School for the Deaf in the Tamwe township of Yangon is the second state run deaf school in Myanmar and was opened in 2014 by the Ministry of Social Welfare. It offers education up to Grade 5. All lessons are taught in the new Myanmar Standard Sign Language (see section 2.13). Currently, the school has a student population of around 40, although this figure is likely to increase dramatically over the coming years.



The Kalay Immanuel School for the Deaf was founded in 2004 with support from Deaf Ministries International, a Christian mission founded in South Korea in 1979. Located in the North West Sagaing division, roughly 30 students attend the school, most of whom come from the surrounding Chin hills. The school offers education up to Grade 3. Anecdotal reports from deaf people in Yangon suggest that the language used in the school is heavily influenced by American Sign Language.

## **2.10. The Yangon deaf community**

Deaf signers in Yangon form a small but stable community, distinguished by their shared sign language and unique cultural identity (deaf people's reflections on entering into this community are presented in Chapter 6, section 6.2.6). Members of the Yangon deaf community are predominantly Mary Chapman School alumni, although a small minority enter the community having previously attended mainstream schools. Community members socialise regularly, visiting each other's homes, meeting at teashops, attending deaf churches (if Christian) and making occasional social calls to the Mary Chapman School. The Yangon Deaf Association also holds regular meetings<sup>17</sup>. At present, there is no national deaf organisation in Myanmar.

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<sup>17</sup> I was unable to attend the Yangon Deaf Association due to a pre-existing, intra-community dispute between the organiser and other members of the community.

### **2.11. The Mary Chapman School for the Deaf**

The Mary Chapman School for the Deaf is located in Yangon and is the oldest and largest deaf school in the country. Established by a British missionary in 1920 it is one of the few Christian institutions in Myanmar that has remained open throughout the country's turbulent recent history. While colonialism brought many Christian missionary schools to Myanmar, the majority of these fell into decline following independence as the new government began promoting secular schools as part of its nationalist agenda. This pattern of decline intensified following the military coup of 1962, as Christian Schools were officially prohibited and were either nationalised or closed altogether (see Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut, 2015). It is unclear why the Mary Chapman School was able to continue operating during this time, although deaf people's marginal status in society may have meant that a Christian deaf school was not considered to be a threat to the government.

In 1920, at the time of opening, the Mary Chapman School had three students. Almost two decades later, the school, which was then comprised of ten students and three teachers, evacuated to Southern Kachin State for the duration of the Second World War, returning to Yangon in the late 1940s. The school has since grown considerably, and in the 2014-2015 academic year there were 387 students in attendance, many of whom had travelled from other states and divisions to receive their education.

Figure 3: The Mary Chapman School for the Deaf.



A total of forty-three teachers work at the school, two of whom are deaf sign language users. In line with Myanmar government regulations, all teachers must hold a university degree. Once appointed at the Mary Chapman School, teachers then receive a further two years of in-house training, including a two-week course in YSL. Language learning then continues through communication with their deaf students. Although Myanmar is a Buddhist-majority country<sup>18</sup>, the Mary Chapman School has maintained a strong Christian tradition since its missionary beginnings. The majority of teachers are Christian<sup>19</sup> and the school organises religious activities such as evening prayer sessions and Sunday school classes. While students of all faiths are welcomed to the school, anecdotal evidence indicates that many convert to Christianity during the course of their studies.

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<sup>18</sup> The Myanmar census (2016) recorded 89.9% of the population as Buddhist.

<sup>19</sup> Many teachers at the school are also of non-Burman ethnicity, coming originally from the ethnic border regions.



Day students pay a monthly fee of 1000 Kyat (approximately 1 USD) to cover their tuition costs. Nearly 60% of students board (see Figure 4), and pay 15,000 Kyat per month. While the Mary Chapman School has NGO status and receives no state funding, it does not sit completely outside of the national education system; teachers follow the national curriculum and students must sit the same formal exams as state school students. To this extent, the school faces many of the challenges that afflict the national education system, as described in section 2.4.5 of this chapter. (Teachers' concerns regarding the national curriculum are discussed in Chapter 5).

Figure 4: Boarding students eating dinner in the school hall.



Education in Myanmar begins with kindergarten and continues to Grade 11, with school attendance compulsory until Grade 5. While children typically begin schooling at age 5, students enrolling at the Mary Chapman School are often older due to factors such as late diagnosis of deafness, a lack of parental awareness regarding deaf schools, and previous attendance at mainstream schools. Consequently, students of different ages often study within the same class.



At the time of its inauguration, the Mary Chapman School offered education up to Grade 5. In 2003 this was extended to Grade 6, and in 2014 the school introduced Grade 7. During fieldwork the School Principal and a number of teachers expressed a desire to offer an education up to Grade 11. However, it is unlikely that this will be possible in the near future; with increasing numbers of deaf children seeking a formal education the school has already begun to reach its capacity. Thus, at present students who wish to pursue their education from Grades 8 to 11 must transfer to the nearby mainstream high school where no language support services are available. For many, this prospect is a significant deterrent to continuing their education. This is reflected in the low number of students who make the transition each year; in the past 5 years only 64 students have continued their education at the State High School.

Even fewer deaf students pursue higher education; in the history of the Mary Chapman School, a total of 11 have gone on to study at university. Furthermore, with a university degree being a pre-requisite for becoming a teacher, the vast majority of deaf adults are effectively barred from entering the school's academic workforce. Academic literature describes a similar pattern around the world. Lytle et al. (2005) point out that the majority of deaf workers at schools in China occupy low-grade positions as opposed to academic roles, and research by Musengi et al. (2013) and Magongwa (2010), conducted in Zimbabwe and South Africa respectively, show that the requirement of a university degree has excluded the majority of deaf adults from establishing careers in teaching. Consequently, a vicious cycle is perpetuated in which deaf people's impoverished educational experiences preclude them from gaining the necessary qualifications to pursue a career in deaf education themselves (this is discussed further in Chapter 5, section 5.2).

After leaving school the majority of deaf students find low paid employment, often working as tailors or in other types of manual labour (see Figure 5). As Wrigley (1997, p. 38) states, the experience of deafness in the developing world is 'nearly always connected to underemployment and poverty'. The Mary Chapman School often plays an

active role in helping alumni to secure work, in keeping with its general commitment to provide pastoral care and offer students guidance on a wide range of social and personal matters. The school also offers recent alumni the opportunity to undertake vocational training in handicrafts, shiatsu massage and beauty therapy (see Figures 6 and 8). Handicrafts, made by eight deaf apprentices in the school handicraft room, are sold at trade fairs throughout the country, and the shiatsu massage centre is open to the public and employs a total of thirteen deaf adults. A beauty center, opened in August 2015, employs a further eight deaf alumni. In addition to offering students training and employment prospects, these initiatives also draw in visitors, generating awareness of the school and contributing financially towards its upkeep.

Figure 5: Deaf metal workers making ornaments for pagodas in Yangon.





Figure 6: The handicraft room at the Mary Chapman School.



Figure 7: Deaf workers at the shiatsu massage centre at the Mary Chapman School.



### **2.11.1 Opportunities for hearing people to learn YSL at the school**

While opportunities for the general public to learn YSL are extremely limited<sup>20</sup>, the Mary Chapman School does offer short introductory courses during the school's summer holiday. Prepared and taught by deaf adults, these classes run for 5 days and are predominantly attended by youth groups. In 2014, a total of 10 participants attended. The school also arranges sign language courses for parents of deaf students. There is currently no dictionary for YSL<sup>21</sup> although the School Principal and several deaf people expressed a strong desire for such a resource. Dictionaries represent a practical tool for those outside the community to learn about the language. Moreover, as Corris et al. (2013) and Terrill (2002) highlight, they may also serve a symbolic function, legitimising the validity and prestige of a language. Indeed, shortly after fieldwork for this project had concluded, a group of six deaf people from Yangon began to compile a YSL dictionary, working in collaboration with the Centre for Sign Linguistics and Deaf Studies at the University of Hong Kong.

A small number of parents and carers accompany their deaf children to school, where they spend their days in the compound socialising with other parents and carers, as well as volunteering (see Figure 8). Spending time at the school in a deaf signing environment represents an opportunity for these parents to learn YSL and envisage a positive future for their children (see Chapter 6).

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<sup>20</sup> Opportunities to learn Myanmar's sign languages may increase in the future. According to post-fieldwork contact with deaf participants, the Yangon University of Foreign Languages has plans to open a sign language department. Discussions are also being held with the Mandalay University of Foreign Languages regarding the establishment of a similar department.

<sup>21</sup> A basic dictionary exists for Mandalay Sign Language, containing over 1500 signs.



Figure 8: Mothers of deaf students sit outside the school's handicraft room.



### **2.11.2 Language policy at the Mary Chapman School**

Until the late 1980's, language policy at the Mary Chapman School favoured oralism, an approach to deaf education whereby lip-reading and speech are used in the classroom to the exclusion of sign language. Today, although it follows no official language policy, the school emphasises the importance of students acquiring both YSL and written Burmese. Teachers use either bilingual or Total Communication methods (these approaches are described in the following section), depending on their personal strengths and the needs and abilities of their students<sup>22</sup>. (A detailed discussion of teachers' language practices and classroom language policy is presented in Chapter 5). It should be noted that the shift from Oralism towards Total Communication and bilingualism conforms to global trends in deaf education, as described in the following section.

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<sup>22</sup> Students with sufficient residual hearing have the option to undertake additional training in spoken Burmese.

### **2.11.3. An historical overview of global LPP trends in deaf education**

From the late eighteenth century, as the industrial revolution led to rapidly expanding urban areas, the first deaf schools were established, most notably in Europe and North America. As Lang (2011) notes, momentum in deaf education grew significantly at this time. During the nineteenth century over thirty deaf schools were founded in Britain, often by deaf alumni and deaf teachers who had attended previously established deaf schools (Brennan, 1992). A similar pattern of deaf school development was also observed in the United States and Australia (see Lang, 2011, and Schembri et al., 2010, respectively). At this time sign language was used as the primary medium of instruction and deaf adults were heavily invested in school life, with many employed as teachers. However, by the mid nineteenth century oralist methods, focused on developing students' lip-reading and speech skills, had begun to gain popularity in Europe. The Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, held in Milan in 1880, resulted in the widespread suppression of sign language in education, whilst oralist methods were promoted wholeheartedly (see Lane, 1999; Ladd, 2003; Lang, 2011). Crucially, the resolution was posited on the assumed superiority of spoken language, with total linguistic assimilation seen as essential for ensuring deaf students' social participation:

[T]he congress, considering the incontestable superiority of speech over signs, for restoring deaf-mutes to social life and for giving them greater facility in language, declares that the method of articulation should have preference over that of signs in the instruction and education of the deaf and dumb (cited in Marschark et al., 2006, p. 32).

The resolution attracted popular support from various hearing groups and led to widespread calls in Europe and beyond for a total ban on sign language in education. At the same time, deaf teachers were removed from teaching posts and replaced by hearing teachers who did not know sign language (Brennan, 1992). It should be noted that some schools continued to use sign language and fingerspelling into the twentieth century. For example, Brennan (1992) describes how a minority of British deaf schools used sign

language as the medium of instruction post 1880, and Schembri et al. (2010) make a similar observation with regards to deaf education in Australia.

Despite these exceptions, however, opposition towards the use of sign language in education became widely entrenched, not only in the West but across the globe; many of the earliest deaf schools in the developing world were established by hearing missionaries from Europe who, in the majority of cases, adhered to oralist methods (see Moores and Miller (2009) for examples in Asia, Africa and Latin America)<sup>23</sup>. In 1920, when the Mary Chapman School was founded, oralism dominated in deaf education. Accordingly, oral methods were employed at the school, where they continued to be used for the following six decades (see section 2.11.2)

By the 1970s, the academic underachievement of deaf students around the world had prompted a re-evaluation of deaf teaching methods (Evans, 1982). The low educational attainment of deaf students was widely attributed to a lack of quality communication in education (Cerney, 2007). Oralism was further critiqued for focusing on the development of speech while neglecting to develop students' academic skills; in 1979, Conrad's influential UK-based study found that 50% of students with severe to profound hearing loss left oral education programs with a reading age of only seven. Conrad's study also highlighted the unsuitability of lip-reading as a method of communication in schools; deaf students who had undergone extensive lip-reading training were no more able to read lips than un-trained hearing children.

Total Communication emerged in the late 1970's as an alternative approach to deaf education. It aimed to integrate all methods of communication including sign, gesture, speech, reading and writing. Yet as Baker and Knight (1998) observe, the method most often led to sign supported speech: the simultaneous production of sign and speech. As a result, messages were often incomplete or contradictory, owing to the grammatical incongruity of spoken and signed languages. Despite deaf people's initial support for

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<sup>23</sup> Kiyaga and Moores (2003) note some exceptions to this pattern. For example, while the missionary movement brought oralism to many deaf schools across Sub-Saharan Africa, American missionaries working in Ethiopia often used ASL in the classroom.

Total Communication as an alternative to Oralism, the method resulted in little academic improvement. Furthermore, the lack of a robust philosophical framework meant that sign language was seen primarily as a tool for communication or as a prop for spoken language, as opposed to a language in its own right (Gregory and Hartley, 1991). With deafness still implicitly regarded as a deficiency, Total Communication came to be seen as regressive by many in the deaf community (Ladd, 2003).

A bilingual approach to deaf education began to attract attention in the 1980s, as research proved the linguistic status of sign languages, and pride in sign language and deaf culture started to flourish (Ladd, 2003; Plaza-Pust, 2012). Broadly defined, deaf bilingual education comprises the use of both sign and spoken language in the classroom, with sign language learnt first, followed by the national written language (Ladd, 2003). Unlike Total Communication, however, each language fulfills a distinct function. Furthermore, as Swanwick (2006) points out, the bilingual philosophy gives full recognition to the deaf community's status as a cultural linguistic minority. In Scandinavia the bilingual philosophy has been widely embraced. For example, Svartholm (2010) describes how, in 1983, the first bilingual version of the Swedish National Curriculum was written for deaf schools. Uptake elsewhere, however, has been ad-hoc (Ladd, 2003). As Plaza-Pust (2012) notes, the diversity of approaches to deaf education in use today reflect locally specific socio-political and cultural factors. Moreover, while bilingual education has gained traction in the last few decades, the oral/manual methods debate continues and remains mired in controversy. For Moores (2010) this is due to fundamentally different beliefs regarding the meaning of deafness, the goal of education, and the requirements for a full and meaningful life. (The attitudes of Mary Chapman alumni towards different educational approaches are discussed in Chapter 5.)

## **2.12. Inter-generational linguistic variation in YSL**

It should be noted that the shift from oralism to Total Communication and bilingual methods at the Mary Chapman School has resulted in a significant stylistic difference in



the YSL used by different generations of signers; while Burmese mouthings<sup>24</sup> feature heavily in older deaf people's signing, younger signers tend to use very few mouthings.

YSL is also characterised by a high degree of inter-generational linguistic variation at the lexical level. As Schembri and Johnston (2013) note, this type of variation is a common feature of signed languages and is the product of deaf children's unique experience of sign language acquisition. With the vast majority of deaf children born to hearing parents,<sup>25</sup> sign language is typically acquired late through peer-peer contact in the school rather than parent-child interaction. This discontinuity in transmission results in significant inter-generational differences and language change.

(Community attitudes towards inter-generational variation in YSL are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.)

### **2.13. The Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project**

In response to the high level of lexical variation reported between Yangon and Mandalay Sign Languages, the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project was initiated in 2007 by the government. The project is overseen by the Ministry of Social Welfare and carried out in collaboration with the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)<sup>26</sup>. To date, the project has involved two phases. Phase one took place between 2007 and 2010, with two main objectives: developing a set of standardised signs for dissemination around the country, and raising awareness of sign language amongst the hearing

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<sup>24</sup> Certain signs are accompanied by mouthings whereby the signer silently articulates the spoken language equivalent. Mouthings are distinct from mouth gestures, which are not related to the spoken language and convey affective or adverbial information (see Sutton-Spence and Woll, (1999) and Pfau and Quer (2009) for discussion on the linguistic patterning and function of mouthings and mouth gestures).

<sup>25</sup> Mitchell and Karchmer (2004) estimate that in the United States approximately 95% of deaf children are born into hearing families. However, it should be noted that this figure is likely to vary geographically, particularly in areas where hereditary deafness is prevalent.

<sup>26</sup> It is unclear why JICA was selected to lead the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation project. However, as Er (2016) notes, Japan has come to play a key political and economic role in Myanmar, with JICA running numerous major development projects in the country. Moreover, JICA has previous experience of working with deaf communities, having led the International Deaf Leader Training Program in developing countries around Asia (Nakamura, 2006).

population. Phase two ran from 2011 to 2014 and focused on training sign language support workers and interpreters.

In order to create a standardised sign language vocabulary, a task force of deaf sign language users was assembled, with twenty people from Yangon and twenty from Mandalay. Five age groups were equally represented. Participants were asked to produce their preferred signs from a list of Burmese words, with those most widely used being selected as the official Myanmar sign. In cases where there was no majority, the group created a new sign. The Myanmar Sign Language Basic Conversation Book (see Figure 9) (referred to henceforth as ‘the standardised sign language book’, or simply ‘the book’ where the context is clear) was published in August 2009, and contains over 350 signs and phrases in the new standard sign language, along with the written Burmese and English equivalents. The breakdown of these signs’ origins, as calculated by a deaf employee working on the standardisation project, is presented below in Table 1 <sup>27</sup>:

Table 1: Breakdown of signs contained in the standardised sign language handbook.

<b>Signs that were already shared by both regions</b>	<b>New signs developed by the project</b>	<b>Signs from Mandalay</b>	<b>Signs from Yangon</b>
51%	31%	10%	8%

In order to generate greater public awareness of sign language and deafness, the standardised sign language book also presents basic information regarding the linguistic structure of signed languages (see Figures 9, 10 and 11). Particular emphasis is given to the role of non-manual features (as described in Chapter 1) as well as the absence of

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<sup>27</sup> The high percentage of signs shared between Yangon and Mandalay may be partially accounted for by iconicity, in which the physical form of a sign exhibits a close relationship to its meaning. As Parkhurst and Parkhurst (2003) note, iconicity raises the chance of cognates, creating an illusion of relatedness. In order to accurately assess the level of relation between sign languages they advocate the use of a modified Swadesh list that only includes signs with low iconic potential. While iconicity is much more prevalent in signed languages than spoken languages, Schembri (2010) points out that sign languages also feature signs that are completely arbitrary.

Burmese mouthings. Indeed, the book cites awareness-raising as its primary aim and the key to improving deaf people's social participation. In this way, it describes how the standardised sign language will empower deaf people, acting as a bridge between deaf and hearing communities and helping to remove the communication barriers that currently limit deaf people's full access to society. Moreover, the preface of the book asserts that improving deaf peoples' social participation is the responsibility of every Myanmar citizen, and explicitly states that the standardised sign language book is not aimed at deaf people or their families, but the entire population of Myanmar. By 2014, over 6000 copies of the book had been distributed around the country. Deaf awareness-raising workshops were also held during this first phase of the project, reaching over five thousand hearing people by 2012 (JICA, 2012).

Figure 9: The Myanmar Sign Language Basic Conversation Book.

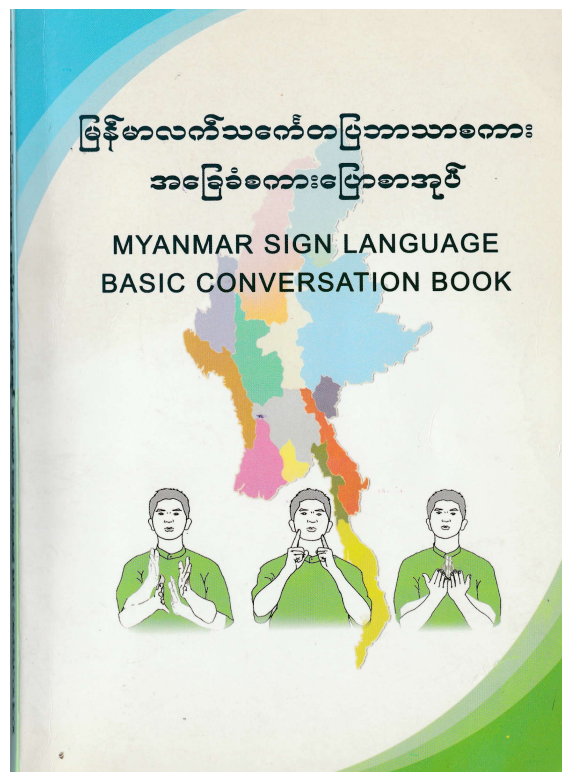
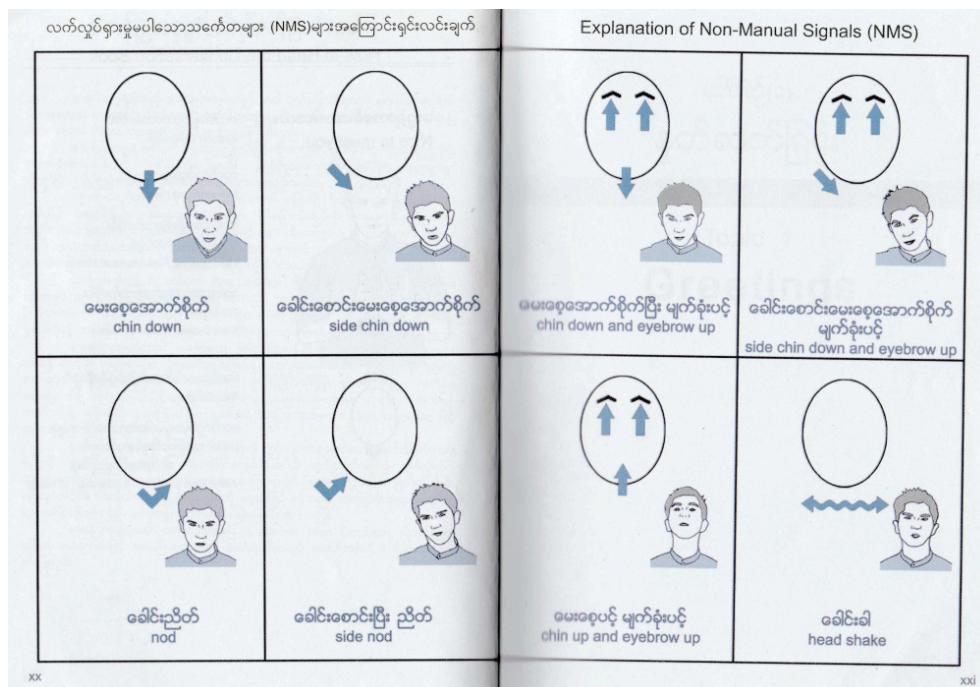


Figure 10: Page from the book demonstrating the structure of signs, including non-manual features.



Figure 11: A glossary of non-manual features included in the preface of the book.



Phase two of the project focused on training sign language support workers through the development of an eighteen month course involving classroom based learning and work placements. Classes were held at the new state-run deaf school in the Tamwe township of Yangon (see section 2.9), and were delivered by a team of nine instructors, including four deaf people from Yangon, three from Mandalay, and one hearing sign language user from each city. Students learned Myanmar Standard Sign Language and also attended courses in linguistics and interpretation. As noted above, the standardised sign language book contains only a few hundred signs, thus, when no standard sign exists, trainers must decide whether to teach the Yangon or Mandalay sign. According to one trainer, this decision is made on the basis of each sign's relative transparency of meaning. If neither city has a sign for a particular concept then the team creates a new lexical item.

To date, a total of 24 language support workers have completed the training course, including two teachers from the Mary Chapman School. Notably, trainees are recruited from around the country, with the hope that the standardised sign language will be widely disseminated once students return to their hometowns. At the time of fieldwork a further 21 students were currently enrolled on the programme, and JICA's website (2015) states that the Myanmar government has allocated a budget for the continued training of sign language support workers. The training course has led to the start of sign language interpreting services in the country<sup>28</sup>, and since 2015, sign language interpretation has been introduced to the Myanmar Radio and Television's (MRTV) daily 8pm news service.

While the Sign Language Standardisation Project frames itself as a vehicle for deaf empowerment, Mori (2011) observes that the Myanmar government has in fact been reluctant to cede control to deaf people during the process of standardisation<sup>29</sup>. In particular, he describes how the government rejected JICA's plan to establish a national deaf organisation in order to generate standard signs via a central, deaf-led, community.

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<sup>28</sup> Previously deaf people had to call upon teachers and family members to act as interpreters, although their often limited sign language proficiency and lack of interpreting knowledge severely compromised deaf people's access to essential public services.

<sup>29</sup> Mori writes about his own experience of being involved in the early stages of the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project.

While the standardisation project has made significant steps towards raising deaf awareness, it should nevertheless be noted that minimising linguistic diversity has been a goal of successive Myanmar governments, with monolingual language policies being employed as a tool for controlling the population (as described in the earlier section of this chapter). According to one JICA employee, the Myanmar government ultimately envisages the standardised sign language becoming the sole sign language of deaf people in the country. Indeed, the Ministry of Social Welfare has requested that the Mary Chapman School start using the standardised sign language (see Chapter 7).

While phases one and two of the project are now complete, work on language standardisation continues; in 2016 the Ministry of Social Welfare developed a textbook of signs for use in kindergarten, with plans for a similar book to be produced for primary level schooling. JICA is also currently preparing to start a third phase of the project, which will focus on further developing the Sign Language Support Worker Training Course.

Community responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project and the resulting standard signs are presented in Chapter 7.

## **Chapter 3: Literature Review**

### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter provides a theoretical backdrop to the main research themes, presenting a comprehensive and critical review of the relevant literature. In line with the cultural-linguistic model of deafness (described in the Introduction), the chapter refers to research findings from both spoken minority languages and signed languages. Where relevant, the discussion considers issues that uniquely affect deaf communities.

Throughout the chapter attention is drawn to the sociopolitical and ideological nature of language planning and policy. Accordingly, the chapter opens with a range of definitions regarding language ideologies before critically examining the innate link that is often assumed to exist between language and identity.

Next, language planning and policy (LPP) is introduced with an overview of historical approaches in the field, followed by a discussion of contemporary instances of LPP. The ideological and political nature of the discipline is highlighted.

A critical review of language in education policy (LEP) is then provided, focusing on the potential of mother-tongue education to promote social justice. It is suggested that fixation on the technical aspects of implementing linguistic minority LEP risks abstracting language from its socio-political context, thus hampering efforts to tackle inequality. This argument is then extended with a critique of the language rights paradigm, which has informed the majority of campaigns for mother-tongue education and policies aimed at protecting linguistic minorities. The model's alignment to the dominant political framework is problematised and the concept of 'linguistic citizenship' is put forward as a more robust and transformative model of equality, capable of circumventing a number of the pitfalls associated with the language rights framework.

As discussions on language form part of a broader discourse on social participation and citizenship, the final part of the chapter argues that research into language planning and policy should not focus solely on language ideologies; in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of LPP and its outcomes, researchers should also attend to the wider ambit of social, political and cultural ideologies that operate in a community, paying particular attention to local models of citizenship and conceptualisations of equality.

### **3.2. Language ideologies**

Concepts of language ideologies are diffuse and varied (Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994). A number of definitions are discussed below, collectively conveying the common-sense nature of ideologies, their rationalising function and fundamentally socio-political nature.

For Silverstein (1979, p. 193) language ideologies constitute ‘sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use’. Similarly, Heath (cited in Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994, p. 57) describes ideologies as ‘self-evident ideas and objectives a group holds concerning roles of language in the social experience of the group’<sup>30</sup>. Both of these definitions capture the ‘common-sense’ nature of ideologies, but overlook the political. A more encompassing interpretation, which accounts for socio-political and cultural dimensions, is offered by Woolard and Schieffelin (1994, pp. 55–56), who describe how ‘ideologies envision and enact links of language to group and personal identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology’. Likewise, Irvine (1989, p. 255) describes ideologies as ‘the cultural system of ideas about social and linguistic relationships, together with their loading of moral and political interests’.

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<sup>30</sup> While language ideologies are often discussed at the community level, it should be noted that they can vary dramatically within groups (Kroskrity and Field, 2009). As Schieffelin and Doucet (1998, p. 286) observe, a single community may have ‘multiple, competing, and contradictory ideologies of language’.



It is notable that the term 'ideology' is often used interchangeably with 'belief' and there is little clarity regarding the relationship between these two concepts. For example, Irvine and Gal (2000) consider ideologies to be imbued with political and moral interests in a way that beliefs are not. In contrast, Cameron (2009) defines beliefs as mental constructs held by an individual while describing ideologies as social constructs held by groups. As Austin and Sallabank (2014) note, while beliefs and ideologies appear to be points on a continuum there is no consensus as to where each concept falls or even what constitutes the continuum. Furthermore, there is a similar tendency in the literature for ideologies to be somewhat matter-of-factly equated with ideas (see, for example, Irvine, 1989; Woolard, 1998). Yet Blommaert (1999) and Spitulnik (1998) contend that this risks depicting ideologies as momentary or even arbitrary, something that people 'just happen to have' (Blommaert, 1996, p. 6). In fact, ideologies are rooted in a group's history and operate within the constraints of their socio-cultural frameworks. Moreover, they do not simply reflect the social world, but also influence its organisation in a mutually constitutive relationship. Spitulnik's (1998, p. 164) definition captures both the political and processual nature of ideologies when she states that they are 'among many other things, about the construction and legitimation of power, the production of social relations of sameness and differences, and the creation of cultural stereotypes'.

The mutually constitutive relationship between language ideologies and the social world is illustrated in Irvine and Gal's (2000) influential account of the three key semiotic processes underlying the formation of ideologies. The first process involves the 'iconization' of the indexical relation between linguistic form and social meaning, in which a linguistic feature is seen as an intrinsic characteristic of the group itself, positioning it in contrast to other groups. The social partitioning that results from iconization may then undergo 'fractal recursivity', in which the perception of an 'opposition' at one level of social identity is projected onto another level so as to create sub-categories or super-categories. As Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 38) explain, these oppositions do not represent fixed groups, but 'provide actors with the discursive or cultural resources to claim and thus attempt to create shifting "communities", identities, selves, and roles, at different levels of contrast, within a cultural field.' Finally, 'erasure'

refers to the psychological process of overlooking certain linguistic behaviours that are inconsistent with the ideological schema. Kroskrity's (2000) description of an ideology of unified and homogenous speech within the Arizonian Tewa community demonstrates the semiotic process of erasure. As he describes, this ideology effectively erases intra-lingual variation within the community, discursively constructing an ethnic and social identity which not only promotes solidarity by cutting across class differences but also serves to maintain social distance from other groups. Thus, language ideologies do not reflect the social world neutrally, but sculpt reality, discursively rendering social categories and distinctions.

Crucially, examining community language ideologies can offer insight into community responses to top-down policies and interventions, such as language standardisation. As Lüpke and Storch (2013, pp. 124–125) describe, ideological analysis allows scholars to reach a closer understanding of why minority language users change or maintain their linguistic repertoires when faced with outside attempts to modify and 'develop' their language. (See section 3.11 of this chapter on the importance of also examining the wider framework of ideologies, beliefs and ambitions that extend beyond language in order to understand linguistic choices and behaviours).

### **3.3. Language and identity**

A considerable body of work in Linguistic Anthropology and Sociolinguistics has focused on the relationship between language and identity. At times, however, scholars have automatically assumed an innate, essential, link between the two. For example, Reid-Collins (2013) refers to rhetoric from the field of Endangered Language Studies, in which essentialist reasoning is often invoked when describing the relation between language and identity. In this way, Fishman (1991), argues that 'one cannot be Xish through language Y' (see also Grenoble and Whaley, 2006; Hinton and Hale, 2001). Language planning and policy is often characterised by a similar deterministic logic, with ideologies of a one-to-one correspondence between language and identity informing many policy decisions (Tollefson, 2013) (see for example Chapter 2 on LPP in

Myanmar). Yet, to assume an essential link between language and identity overlooks alternative ways of being and identifying. Accordingly, post positivist scholarship has moved discussion away from essentialising discourses, focusing instead on the fluidity and multiplicity of identities (see Bhabha, 1994; Butler, 1999; Omoniyi and White, 2006; Pavlenko and Blackledge, 2004). As a result, identity has come to be widely accepted as a socially contingent and performative entity, engaged in a constant process of construction in which language is but one of many possible identity markers (Blommaert and Verschueren, 1998).

The contingent relationship between language and identity is clearly illustrated by King's (1999) study of language practices and identities in two contrasting Ecuadorian Quichua communities, where Spanish is also spoken. The Lagunas community has lost many traditional aspects of community life, and significant language shift has occurred owing to their close proximity to the commercial centre of Saraguro and the Pan American Highway. In this context, where ethnic boundaries have blurred, Quichua language has become strategically associated with the reclamation of ethnic identity, and the community has embarked on language revitalisation movements. In contrast, members of the remote Tambopamba community typically spend their days engaged in traditional agricultural practices, and there are clear boundaries between indigenous and mainstream life. The use of Quichua in this community is primarily associated with personal content and traditional settings, but it is not seen as an essential aspect ethnic identity, with other aspects of their culture fulfilling this role.

### **3.3.1. Implications of post-positivist thinking on group self-determination**

While a rejection of essentialism serves to emancipate groups from reductionist and homogenised representations, it paradoxically risks undermining the political determination and self-perceived authenticity of marginalised groups who positively conceptualise their identities in essential terms (Conversi, 2002). As McIntosh (2005) states, although essentialist thinking has been criticised for its potentially pernicious effects, this type of reasoning can in fact be vital to local ethnic politics. Specifically, she

describes how groups may mobilise essentialist tropes as they work to define their identity and to protect and promote group interests. Ladd (2003) also discusses this in relation to deaf communities. While recognising the multiple and fluid nature of identity, he speculates that anti-essentialist discourse risks trivialising the authenticity of deaf communities who have fought hard to challenge the prevalent doctrine of the medical model of deafness (described in Chapter 1, section 1.6.) and gain recognition as an authentic group on their own terms.

Given that all aspects of the social world are ultimately imagined, with ‘no privileged knowledge, including the scientific, that escapes grounding in social life’, Woolard (1998, p. 10) argues that recognition of the ideological nature of identity does not undermine the legitimacy of groups. Indeed, Anderson’s (1991) seminal thesis on the imagined nature of communities shows that even the most politically authoritative of identities, such as national identity, are social constructs. The fact that identities are discursively constructed does not render them insubstantial. As Taylor states, intersubjective meanings are the foundation of all social experience, constituting the ‘social matrix in which individuals find themselves’ (cited in Packer, 2011, p. 138).

Having considered the nature of language ideologies and the fluid, contextual relation between language and identity, the literature review now turns to language planning and policy.

### **3.4. Language planning and policy (LPP)**

The terms language planning and language policy represent highly interrelated concepts, which are often used interchangeably in the literature. A number of scholars have proposed their own definitions for each term, yet the field is characterised by a lack of consensus regarding the relationship between the two. For example, Kaplan (1997) describes language planning as the superordinate activity, which subsumes language policy: the body of ideas, laws and regulations that aim to affect a change in language use. Yet for Ricento (2006a, p. 18) policy precedes planning, which he defines as the

‘development, evaluation, and implementation of specific language policies’. Likewise, Spolsky (2004) views policy as comprising three sub-components: language practices, language ideologies, and language planning, where planning is defined as a specific effort to modify or influence linguistic practices. Significantly, Spolsky considers that language policy is not restricted solely to official prescriptions, but also encompasses the rules for language that operate either explicitly or implicitly within communities.

Given the general ambiguity regarding the relationship between planning and policy Hornberger (2006) suggests that the term LPP may be best understood as a ‘catch-all-phrase’. This unified designation, she argues, captures the interrelation of the two activities, whilst offering a practical solution to the lack of consensus regarding their relationship. Similarly, McCarty (2011b, p. 7) asserts that the two concepts should be viewed ‘not as separable acts but as mutually constitutive, independent, and co-occurring sociocultural processes.’ In this study, the term ‘language policy’ will be used to specify a body of explicit or implicit ideas and rules for language use, while ‘language planning’ will refer to efforts aimed at altering linguistic behaviour. Following Hornberger’s lead, the term LPP will be used when referring to the process in its entirety.

### **3.5. An historical overview of scholarly approaches to LPP**

LPP became a prevalent activity during colonial expansion in the nineteenth century, when a burgeoning interest in ‘exotic’ languages, along with a penchant for classification and enumeration, led Western structural linguistics to become the authority on classifying and labelling languages. The resulting catalogues of linguistic diversity frequently formed the basis of LPP decisions, and linguists were often called upon to provide expert opinion on language matters. Nevertheless, it was not until the late 1950s that LPP emerged as an object of academic interest (Hornberger, 2006). Since then, research has passed through three broad waves, referred to by Tollefson (1991) as Neo-Classical, Historical-Structural and Ethnographic. Each approach is distinguished by its theoretical focus and methodological orientation. Furthermore, as Ricento (2006b) highlights, distinct epistemological theories of language govern each of the different frameworks.

### **3.5.1. The Neo-Classical Approach**

The Neo-Classical approach emerged in the 1950s and 60s, primarily in response to the perceived language problems of newly formed nation states. This paradigm was marked by its technocratic focus and a commitment to employing LPP as a means of modernising and developing societies. As Fishman (1974, p. 79) states, LPP was primarily concerned with the “organized pursuit of solutions to language problems, typically at the national level”. During this time linguists were frequently recruited to make ‘technical’ decisions regarding which language would best serve national progress. Operating under the structural view of language as an objective, quantifiable and de-contextualised entity (Heller, 2007), LPP was accordingly perceived as a neutral activity whose efficacy could be objectively assessed, most often through the administration of large-scale questionnaires (Hornberger, 2015). Nevertheless, postcolonial research has produced a significant body of work highlighting the socio-political and ideological motivations underpinning this approach to LPP.

As Blommaert (1996, p. 215) argues, LPP during the colonial era worked from an western ethnocentric rationale that was ‘deeply embedded in mainstream colonial ideology’. Not only was the work of linguists imbued with hegemonic ideologies, but language planning further enabled colonial activity, legitimising the imposition of order onto the perceived chaos of linguistic diversity, thus providing a basis from which to establish national boundaries. As Cangaranjah (2007) describes, colonisers typically responded to the perceived problem of linguistic fluidity and hybridity in non-Western languages by imposing linguistic classifications and categories, leading ultimately to the advent of structuralist linguistics. These agendas are clearly visible in the claims of the nineteenth century linguist Lepsius (cited in Irvine and Gal, 2000, p. 50):

From the relations of separate languages, or groups of languages, to one another; we may discover the original and more or less intimate affinity of the nations themselves...[Thus] will the chaos of the nations in [Africa], Asia, America, and Polynesia, be gradually resolved into order, by the aid of linguistic science.

Despite the obvious ideological and political undercurrents of this text, Lepsius' reference to 'science' alludes to the widespread and persistently held view of Linguistics as an objective endeavour, in which language is regarded as an extant and identifiable object of study. However, this positivistic view of language, on which the neo-classical approach to LPP is founded, has been challenged by a number of scholars aligned with areas such as post-structuralism and critical theory. For Makoni and Pennycook (2007) the notion that languages can be clearly defined is rooted primarily in the colonial tradition of enumerating and classifying. Also noting the colonial preference for creating taxonomies of African languages, Fabian (1983, p. 179) argues that 'any enumeration of distinct languages will be an artefact of linguistic classification rather than an accurate indication of communicative praxis.'

As Freeland and Patrick (2004) observe, 'authoritative' classifications of language as imposed by linguists and policy makers have not typically held relevance for communities, who often regard language as a contextualised social and cultural practice (see also Canagarajah, 2007; Lüpke and Storch, 2013; Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994). The disjunction between official and local conceptualisations of language is well illustrated by Makoni and Pennycook (2007) who contrast the 7000 languages currently listed in Ethnologue with the estimated 40, 000 language names in use around the world today.

Power relations are thrown into sharp relief when an outsider's view of language is imposed on a community. Moreover, the way in which a linguistic variety is circumscribed and labeled can have significant consequences in the material world, most notably in policy making (Stebbins, 2014). As Ricento (2006a, p. 16) stresses:

How we understand and conceptualize *language* has important consequences for how we might evaluate linguistic *arrangements* and the explicit and implicit policies which contribute to - or oppose - such arrangements. (italics in original)

Crucially, the assumption that language is a naturally delineated entity has served to justify oppressive LPP, divorcing language from its communicative milieu and socio-political context, and concealing the influence of the hegemonic interests, ideologies and power relations that motivate language planning and policy. As Shohamy (2006) describes, LPP is always a mechanism for promoting ideological agendas.

### **3.5.2. The Historical-Structural Approach**

Countering the notion of LPP as a well-intentioned and rational pursuit, and based on a distinct epistemological orientation to language, the Historical-Structural framework emerged in the late 1970s. According to this paradigm:

the major goal of policy research is to examine the historical basis of policies and to make explicit the mechanisms by which policy decisions serve or undermine particular political and economic interests (Tollefson, 1991, p. 32).

Accordingly, scholars began to focus on critical readings of official policy text, aiming to elucidate the ideologies and unequal power relations embodied within LPP. While this approach attended to the socio-political and ideological basis of LPP, it was later critiqued by scholars including Ricento and Hornberger (1996) for attending exclusively to official policy documents and overlooking language practices and ideologies, and agency at the local level.

### **3.5.3. The Ethnographic Approach**

In order to account for community ideologies, and examine the way in which community stakeholders interpret and adapt official policies, the ethnographic approach to LPP research began to develop in the 1990s. As Saxena and Martin-Jones (2013) describe, the emergence of ethnography reflected a shift towards interpretivist forms of research alongside a simultaneous epistemological shift, with language increasingly regarded as a form of social action. Working from this basis, and in a clear departure from the previous focus on official texts, McCarty (2011a) argues that LPP represents a dynamic socio-cultural process. Similarly, Ricento and Hornberger (1996) highlight the dynamic



interaction between various interested parties, comparing LPP to an onion whose layers represent different agents and processes, all of which interact with each other in complex and transformative ways. It should be noted that the ethnographic approach does not disregard the significance of official texts. It does, however, emphasise the agency of local actors to subvert ideologies embedded in official policy. As Hornberger and Johnson (2007, p. 528) observe: “texts are nothing without the human agents who act as interpretive conduits between the language policy levels”. In this way, Johnson (2013) asserts that ethnographic LPP research is not a study of policy per se, but a study of how language users engage with policy.

With its focus on local level agency and resistance, ethnographic LPP research has themes of power relations, linguistic inequality and social justice at its core. Accordingly, a number of researchers locate their ethnographic LPP research more specifically within the field of critical ethnography (as described in Chapter 1) (see Combs et al., 2011; Hill and May, 2011; Hopson, 2011; Jaffe, 2011; McCarty et al., 2011).

(Details regarding the ethnographic methodology of this research project are discussed in Chapter 4).

### **3.6. LPP in action: examples from the literature**

This section opens with a description of some common taxonomies of LPP. It then focuses on contemporary instances of official LPP, with particular attention given to LPP in the context of sign language and deaf communities. Throughout the discussion the inherently political nature of LPP is made clear, as is the relevance of community language ideologies.

Official LPP has traditionally been divided into two broad camps: corpus and status planning (Kloss, 1969). While corpus planning describes attempts to alter the structure and lexicon of a language, status planning concerns its relative status in society. The difference between the two, however, may be easier to discern in theory than in practice.

As Shohamy (2006) asserts, corpus planning is likely to be more intertwined with status planning than is generally acknowledged in the literature. Similarly, Spolsky (2004, p. 11) describes how:

any change in the character of a language is likely to result in a change in the use environment, and any change in the use environment is likely to induce a change in the character of the language.

Moreover, while the terms corpus and status planning delimit the intended outcomes of LPP, they pay no consideration to the ideologies that lie behind policy-making decisions. In recognition of this, Ruíz (1984) introduced the concept of *Orientations* as a means of analysing the ‘complex of dispositions toward language and its role, and towards languages and their role in society’ which determine policy decisions (Ruíz, 1984, p. 16). Three orientations are detailed by Ruíz: language-as-problem; language-as-right; and language-as-resource. In order to contextualise the following section a brief outline of these orientations is provided below. A detailed critique of the main orientations to minority language planning is presented in section 3.9 of this chapter.

Underlying the neo-classical approach to planning and policy, the language-as-problem orientation attributes the socio-economic disadvantage experienced by groups to their language, and thus seeks remedies to social marginalisation via linguistic intervention. Notable examples include assimilative monolingual policies and language standardisation programmes. As Ruíz points out, problematising language reveals a more general attitude of opposition towards cultural and social diversity that stems largely from nationalistic ideologies linking linguistic homogeneity to social cohesion. In contrast to the ‘problem’ orientation, language-as-right represents the predominant approach to LPP amongst linguistic minorities themselves (see section 3.9, this Chapter), whereby linguistic freedom and social inclusion are sought through legal protections and entitlements. While the language-as-problem and language-as-right orientations have dominated the field of policy making, Ruíz articulates an alternative orientation, based on the view of language as a valuable societal resource. This outlook, he argues, holds a greater chance of

achieving wider societal appreciation of minority languages and long-term social cohesion.

### **3.6.1. The persistence of neo-classical LPP**

Despite the development of critical and ethnographic approaches to LPP, and Ruiz's conceptual framework, Lo Bianco (2010) notes that in reality language policies are seldom influenced by academic theory. Nationalistic ideologies regarding the need for linguistic cohesion remain dominant and, as Irvine and Gal (2000) point out, ideas about language that were framed during the colonial era have remained entrenched in current analytic frameworks. As a consequence, ideological analysis has remained firmly on the periphery of linguistics and LPP, with both fields retaining their status as purely scientific endeavours. Consequently, the structural-functional conceptualisation of language has endured within wider society alongside the neo-classical view of LPP as an unproblematic and ideologically neutral component of public policy aimed at solving language 'problems'.

### **3.6.2. Ideological tensions in LPP**

In addition to the general political mood regarding minority languages and multilingualism, sign language planning and policy has been influenced by some unique ideologies regarding the perceived sub-linguistic status of signing. As Branson and Miller (2007) highlight, until recently Sign Languages, as well as Creoles, were considered to deviate so drastically from the authoritative image of language as to make them unworthy of linguistic study (see also Degraff, 2005). These ideologies have infringed heavily on human rights, with both types of language frequently barred from education in favour of assimilative policies (Stebbins, 2014). For Degraff (2005) the view of Creoles as a typologically exceptional class of language represents a particularly pernicious myth, which stems ultimately from race theories developed during the colonial era whereby Creoles were systematically undermined as part of a larger project of de-humanisation. Through a similar ideological process of indexicality, the stigmatisation of Sign Languages and their subsequent treatment in official LPP may be attributed to the medical model of deafness, whereby the atypical linguistic structure of sign languages is

associated with disability (Napier, 2015; Turner, 2009). As Lane (1984) speculates, the particularly acute oppression of sign language users is frequently justified by discourses of physical impairment and deficiency.

The association of sign languages with disability has resulted in a particularly paternalistic approach to sign language planning, with deaf people seldom included in policy-making decisions regarding their language (Reagan, 2010). Evidence of this is clearly depicted by Schermer (2012) in her account of the standardisation of NGT (sign language of the Netherlands), where, in response to calls from parents and teachers for a standardised form of the language, the government made standardisation a condition for legal recognition of the language, despite objections from within the deaf community.

Power, ownership, identity and authenticity emerge as central themes in Eichmann's (2009) article on community attitudes towards the proposed standardisation of British Sign Language and German Sign Language, respectively. In both cases, the call for standardisation heralded exclusively from hearing teachers of deaf children and second language learners, to whom the lack of a standard form represented an obstacle to their own learning. For members of the deaf community, however, attempts by hearing people to modify the sign language were seen to encapsulate the power imbalance between the deaf and hearing communities. Consequently, there was widespread resistance towards the proposed projects, with deaf people claiming ownership of their language. Furthermore, the prospect of standardisation was seen as a threat to the authenticity of the languages and the legitimacy of the communities, for whom sign language is central to identity. Indeed, ideologies of authenticity are likely to be particularly pronounced in instances where the language is closely related to culture and identity (see section 3.7 of this chapter for a discussion on the concept of linguistic authenticity). As Woolard (2005, p. 2) states:

The ideology of Authenticity locates the value of a language in its relationship to a particular community. That which is authentic is viewed as the genuine expression of such a community, or of an essential Self. Within the logic of

authenticity, a speech variety must be perceived as deeply rooted in social and geographic territory in order to have value.

Eichman's study clearly illustrates the dominant neo-classical, problem-solving approach to sign language planning and policy. It also supports Jaffe's assertion that LPP is enacted in 'complex fields of practice in which there are multiple and competing ideologies' (2011, p. 206), and demonstrates how a failure to account for these ideologies may lead to conflict and tension. To the extent that LPP is infused with ideology and power relations, the neo-classical problem-solving approach to language may paradoxically introduce new problems. This is particularly notable in the case of language standardisation. While promoted under the auspices of social equality and as a means of overcoming the perceived 'problems' of linguistic diversity, Tollefson (1991, p. 10) contends that the introduction of a single unified language is, in fact, liable to perpetuate social inequality:

[T]he policy of requiring everyone to learn a single dominant language is widely seen as a common-sense solution to the communication problems of multilingual societies. The appeal of this assumption is such that monolingualism is seen as a solution to linguistic inequality...such assumptions justify exclusionary policies and sustain inequality.

It is on this basis that the World Federation for the Deaf (2009) has protested the proposed standardisation of 'Arab' sign languages. Such intervention, the WFD argues, attributes deaf people's social disadvantage to their language, undermining its credibility while deflecting attention away from the real causes of marginalisation: a lack of appropriate deaf education and language support services.

While a uniquely paternalistic approach may characterise top-down sign language planning and policy, ideological tensions can be observed in many instances of LPP. The following examples from the literature illustrate instances in which LPP has thrown community ideologies into sharp relief, and the consequent impact this has had on intra-

community relations. As Milroy (2001) highlights, the promotion of a standard language variety may create a disjuncture between varieties which are considered to be legitimate and those considered to be illegitimate. For a small and already oppressed minority this can result in what Gal (2006, p. 170) refers to as ‘double stigmatisation’. Such concerns are described in Luykx’s (2004) account of Quechua standardisation in Bolivia, where language planners drew on archaic forms that diverged significantly from contemporary dialects. In response, the community articulated concerns over whether the standard variety would result in the creation of a new group of ‘pure’, socially elevated Quechua speakers, thus disrupting the egalitarian structure of the community. The hierarchical potential of creating a standard ‘legitimate language’ is summed up by Bourdieu who argues that:

via the "legitimate language"... the dominant classes establish a distance between themselves and [other] speakers. Thus, the language functions not only to communicate but also to set boundaries between the elite and the masses (cited in Luykx, 2004, p. 96).

The divisive potential of standardisation is further illustrated in Hoffman-Dilloway’s (2016) ethnographic analysis of the Nepali Sign Language (NSL) standardisation programme, which was initiated by the National Federation of the Deaf. As Hoffmann-Dilloway describes, attempts to reduce lexical variation in NSL were accompanied by efforts to promote an upper-caste Hindu Nepali identity. Specifically, standard signs were selected on the basis of their iconic representation of cultural features associated with this social identity. This approach served to stigmatise alternative varieties of NSL, inspiring anxiety and tension amongst some deaf Nepalis not born into this caste.

Wong’s (1999) account of Hawaiian language revitalisation further illustrates how corpus planning may create factions in a community. As Wong observes, education has been the primary focus of revitalisation efforts in Hawaii, with the development of academic vocabulary a pre-requisite to the introduction of Hawaiian as a medium of instruction. This process of lexical modernisation, however, has triggered ideological debate

regarding the authenticity of new lexical items. In particular, the involvement of second language learners in vocabulary development has generated resentment amongst elders, who consider the new forms to be heavily influenced by English structure and western worldviews, fundamentally altering the character of the language. Crucially, a gap has developed between these new forms and what is considered by the elders to be ‘real’ authentic Hawaiian, resulting in a two-tiered linguistic community.

This section has described the potential for corpus planning, including language standardisation, to impact negatively on communities, delegitimising certain linguistic forms and disrupting social dynamics as a result. Yet it should be noted that standardisation may also bring benefits to language users. As Tulloch (2008) states, standardisation can help to promote the vitality of a minority language, facilitating mutual comprehension across regions and increasing opportunities to use the language. In this way, standardisation may also help to strengthen the political influence of the wider language community. In recognition of the diverse potential outcomes of standardisation, Canagarajah (2005) notes that language users may be ambivalent towards this type of intervention as they negotiate multiple, and often competing, community interests and priorities.

### **3.7. Linguistic authenticity and LPP**

The preceding discussion has demonstrated how communities may mobilise ideologies of authenticity in response to LPP, as they attempt to safeguard their language from perceived threats. As McIntosh (2005, p. 1930) states, these ideologies form the basis of prescriptive assertions regarding ‘what kinds of speech are bona fide, original, pure, or otherwise acceptable’. Preserving authentic language has also been a key concern for Linguistic Anthropologists and those working in fields such as language revitalisation and mother-tongue education (e.g. see Hinton and Ahlers, 1999). Indeed, Bucholtz (2003) describes how the concept of authenticity underpins all sociolinguistic research, with scholars seeking out what they consider to be the most authentic communicative practices for analysis. However, despite its centrality to the discipline, Bucholtz (2003) states that

the semantics of authenticity have received very little scholarly attention, with the concept remaining theoretically undeveloped as a result. In many cases, linguists have worked from essentialist assumptions regarding the nature of ‘authentic’ language, valorising linguistic forms that demonstrate ancestry, tradition and longevity (Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2003; Pietikäinen et al., 2016). However, cautioning against this type of essentialist thinking, Pietikäinen (2013, p. 80) describes authenticity as a locally specific phenomenon, emerging from ‘encounters, interactions, socio-cultural situations, and the personal life history of the participants’. Similarly, Bucholtz (2003, p. 408) emphasises the social construction of authenticity, referring to it as the ‘outcome of constantly negotiated social practices’.

Notably, the conventional scholarly view of authenticity fails to account for the growing numbers of communities living in late-modernity, in which traditional social arrangements are displaced by alternative modes of existence (Coupland, 2003; Pietikäinen et al., 2016). As Coupland (2003, p. 425) states, communities living in highly global societies may ‘lack the particularities of structure, history and esteem’ that have been associated with authenticity. To this extent, users of relatively young languages, such as signed languages, may not necessarily assess linguistic authenticity in terms of ancestral forms and historical uniformity, especially when there is significant intergenerational variation (see chapter 2, section 2.12 on intergenerational change in sign languages). In these cases communities may draw on alternative resources to forge locally relevant conceptualisations of authenticity. For this reason, Coupland (2003), Bucholtz (2003), and Pietikäinen et al. (2016) encourage researchers to focus on the process of authentication within individual communities. Moreover, Eira and Stebbins (2008) emphasise the importance of examining a wide range of communities and language situations in order to develop a more comprehensive and representative sociolinguistic theory of authenticity.



### **3.8. Language in education policy (LEP)**

The preceding sections have demonstrated the highly politicised and often controversial nature of LPP. This is particularly true of language policy in education. For Spolsky (2009), education represents the most significant domain in which LPP is enacted, giving it a unique potential to contribute to the oppression or emancipation of linguistic minorities. This section focuses specifically on language in education policy (LEP), with primary attention given to the medium of instruction. It is argued, however, that in order to promote genuine social equality, the scope of LEP must extend beyond strictly linguistic issues.

Overwhelmingly, schools around the world have acted as vehicles for the advancement of nationalistic agendas of unification, working from an ideology of ‘one language, one culture’ with official policy prescribing monolingual education in a national language (Freeland, 2011). Assimilative language policy has also dominated deaf education (see Chapter 2, section 2.11.3 on the policy of oralism). In both cases, discourses of development have permeated the rhetoric surrounding planning decisions, with education in a national language typically promoted under the guise of increasing social mobility (Kamwangamalu, 2008). Nevertheless, findings suggest that minority language students have in fact been persistently disenfranchised by assimilatory monolingual education, with a prevalence of low academic achievement and high drop-out rates (see Akinnsaso, 1993; Dutcher, 1995; Hornberger, 2008; Kamwangamalu, 2008).

#### **3.8.1. Mother-tongue education for social justice?**

In recognition of the powerful role that schools have played in the assimilation and subordination of minority groups, a number of activists and scholars have questioned whether LEP could be harnessed to reverse this cultural and linguistic encroachment and improve the academic achievement of minority groups (Spolsky, 2008). Indeed, mother-tongue instruction has been widely promoted by international agencies such as UNESCO (e.g. see UNESCO/ Trudell, 2008) and has become a central component of language rights discourse for many linguistic minorities, including deaf communities (see, for example, McCarty (2011b); Skutnabb-Kangas, (2008, 2000)). Notably, the fight for

mother-tongue education is often aligned with broader political strategies, as evidenced in discourses linking mother-tongue education to issues of linguistic identity and cultural heritage. As McCarty (2011b) reminds us, language is not a disembodied entity; language struggles are invariably calls for equality and social justice.

Nevertheless, a number of scholars have unequivocally dismissed the school's potential for promoting social justice. Tollefson (1991), for example, argues that LEP has no potential for promoting social equality given that schools are embedded in dominant socio-political structures, which they are destined to reproduce. Similarly, Hinton and Ahlers (1999, p. 66) assert that the school is insufficient for the purposes of language revitalisation, describing it as an 'inherently limited institution with built-in structures that restrict its capacity for full language revitalization'. The view taken by these scholars echoes Bourdieu's (1990) thesis, in which education is presented as a form of symbolic violence whereby an arbitrary cultural framework is imposed on students by a similarly arbitrary power, thus perpetuating the dominant culture and hegemonic social system.

The efficacy of mother-tongue and bilingual schooling represents a topic of enduring controversy, with empirical evidence suggesting that, in many cases, it has failed to improve academic performance or sociolinguistic equality. As Gegeo and Gegeo (2001) point out, academic success rates for those enrolled in mother-tongue programmes have tended to remain low. A host of factors that impede the success of mother-tongue LEP have been identified and discussed in the literature, along with strategies for overcoming them. For example, Nero (2014) describes the lack of teacher training and resources as significant barriers to the successful implementation of Jamaican Creole in schools. With regards to deaf education, Quer and Muller de Quadros (2015) describe how limited resources along with a lack of clarity regarding the exact role of sign language and deaf culture in the classroom have been significant factors in prohibiting the successful implementation of deaf bilingual education. The linguistic competence of teachers may also hinder the implementation of LEP. For example, in the context of deaf education in the United States, Shantie and Hoffmeister (2000) report that only 33% of teachers claim to have an equal comprehension of both American Sign Language (ASL) and English.

These examples draw attention to the range of factors that may hinder mother-tongue education. What is notable within the literature, however, is that despite the socio-political nature of linguistic minority LEP, a distinctly technocratic approach has pervaded the discipline. As Heller and Martin-Jones (2001a) point out, most language in education research has focused on linguistic, cognitive or pedagogical issues, without addressing the social and political context. While the significance of these technical considerations is not denied here, it should be noted that successfully implementing mother-tongue instruction is no guarantee of improving social equality. Indeed, minority language education was regularly employed during the colonial era as a means of securing domination over minority groups (Mario and Desouza, 2007).

As McCarty (2011b, p. 3) puts it, policy is ‘a practice of power’ that operates at every level of society. Similarly, Heller and Martin-Jones (2001a, p. ix) describe how classroom language practices ‘reveal struggles over the establishment of authority and legitimacy’. Fixating solely on the technicalities of LEP serves to disembody language from its socio-political context, obscuring the significance of local ideologies and failing to challenge the dominant power structures at the root of marginalisation (Bartolomé, 1994; Stroud, 2001). Moreover, a technocratic approach to LEP may in fact result in classroom strategies that reinforce asymmetric power structures, inadvertently compounding minority disempowerment (Stroud, 2001). For instance, translating materials from the national curriculum represents a common remedy for the lack of minority language learning materials, yet, as Stroud points out, this process privileges dominant societal epistemologies over indigenous ways of knowing. Indeed, for Stroud the failure of many mother-tongue education programmes to meet their respective goals is primarily attributable to their top-down implementation, a lack of community involvement during programme design, and their consequent subscription to the dominant framework of education.

Hermes’ (2005) research into Obijwe education in North America shows how the appending of language and culture modules onto the existing school curriculum not only

failed to improve academic success, but also led to concerns within the community that their language had been objectified and institutionalised. For example, it was felt that Ojibwe was taught in a very 'English' way, abstracting it from its traditional cultural context and compromising its cultural relevance in the process. As Jaffe (2011) asserts, minority language education is a social project situated within the ideological and cultural frameworks of the school. Thus, new linguistic practices and identities are liable to emerge from, and potentially reproduce, these structures. In a similar example, Lopez (2008) describes community dissatisfaction following the incorporation of Mayan language and culture modules into the official school curriculum. Despite the apparent progressiveness of these new modules, it was felt that indigenous languages were merely serving as conduits for Western knowledge, and the exclusive focus on tangible cultural phenomena was seen as reductive.

It could be argued that instead of alleviating community disadvantage, the uncritical incorporation of linguistic and cultural modules into to an existing curriculum unwittingly works to dampen the political momentum of communities. As Hermes (2005) points out, by creating the impression of equality, this type of programme suppresses an interrogation of the socio-political aspects of discrimination that could inspire a new critical consciousness amongst community members and lead to genuine social transformation.

In light of these concerns, Lopez (2008) advocates a new paradigm of inter-cultural bilingual indigenous education that moves beyond an exclusive focus on pedagogic, cultural and linguistic issues. Instead, he argues, primary importance must be given to indigenous epistemological-political viewpoints and the mental decolonisation of students. Similarly, Manuelito (2005) asserts that simply implementing a multicultural curriculum is insufficient for developing self-determination and empowerment within communities. Consequently, she urges educators to truly decolonise classroom practices through the recognition of group epistemologies and the promotion of indigenous self-determination. In this way, the introduction of indigenous languages in education should be fundamentally linked to the transmission of indigenous knowledge and experiences.

A number of scholars also highlight the benefits of employing indigenous teachers who have experience of the marginalising effects of the dominant education system. For example, in the context of indigenous education in Orissa, India, Mohanty (2009) observes how tribal teachers frequently draw on their personal awareness of the difficulties that students face in the school system in order to make effective pedagogical decisions. Similarly, with reference to deaf education in Norway, Roald (2002) observes that deaf teachers' first-hand experience of progressing through the school system as a deaf person grants them a greater ability to relate to their students. According to Lane (1992) this shared experience equips deaf adults with a greater insight into the disabling effects of the school system and the most appropriate methods for overcoming them.

The potential of a decolonising approach to mother-tongue education is further highlighted by Gegeo and Gegeo (2001), who describe how a new counter-hegemonic school programme in Malaitia on the Solomon islands appears to have encouraged higher levels of student engagement. This alternative approach not only adopts Kwara'ae, as a language of instruction, but also rejects the traditional colonial method of rote recitation. Instead, teachers draw on local epistemologies, such as traditional interactive caregiver-child routines. Instances such as this might be profitably considered in terms of a 'third space', in which students and teachers negotiate their identities and roles in the classroom. As Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) describe, the post-colonialist concept of 'third space' provides a productive theoretical framework from which to analyse the role of language in the negotiation of identity. Specifically, the third space describes a liminal (not necessarily physical) forum in which marginalised groups may question, resist and negotiate dominant cultural representations. According to Bhabha it is an:

In-between space which provides the terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood, singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation...it is in the emergence of these interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference that the inter-subjective

and collective experiences of nationness, community interest or cultural value are negotiated (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

### **3.8.2. A note on ‘empowerment’**

The term empowerment runs through much of the literature on mother-tongue education, yet it is a concept that requires careful theoretical reflection, being both complex and widely contested (Tew, 2002). For Leistyna the assumption that teachers can empower students is highly problematic, deflecting attention from the collective, dialogic nature of progressive education. As Cummins (2001) notes, when used as a transitive verb the concept of empowering implies a hierarchical relationship in which the student is relegated to the role of passive recipients. When read in this way, the notion of empowerment has distinctly paternalistic connotations.

For Tew (2006), contentions of this sort stem ultimately from a lack of definitional clarity amongst scholars regarding the nature of power itself: one common perspective views it as a commodity that an individual possesses and ultimately deploys in order to exercise control and influence over others; an alternative understanding holds that power is a social relation, discursively produced in all human interactions, and having the capacity to either generate or restrict opportunities. In this way, Tew cautions that empowerment should not be viewed as something to be distributed by educators or other powerful bodies. Instead it should be treated as a form of collective action; an exercise in conscious-raising which is achieved through mutual respect and dialogue, whereby professionals such as teachers undertake a critical examination of their role. Cummins (2001) works from a similar premise when he elucidates his own usage of the term, equating empowerment in the classroom with egalitarian and collaboratively constructed relations of power. This specification liberates the concept of empowerment from any paternalistic associations. Moreover, it highlights the primacy of human relations in dismantling asymmetric, prohibitive, power structures in the classroom.

### **3.8.3. Student-teacher relations and the mediation of power in the classroom: LEP as a critical project**

The importance of classroom micro-dynamics is illustrated by Bartolomé (1994) in her analysis of a Kamehameha minority education programme in Hawaii. In contrast to traditional, colonial classroom etiquette, Bartolomé describes how these students engaged in an interactional style involving simultaneous talk typical of their indigenous culture. Not recognising its cultural value, teachers initially discouraged this behaviour, interpreting it as a lack of discipline. However, upon entering into dialogue with their students and becoming aware of its cultural value, teachers incorporated this approach into their classroom practices. In light of the higher levels of engagement and academic success that followed, the same practices were adopted in other institutions, yet comparable levels of success were not achieved. For Bartolomé, uncritically implementing the same method in a different context holds no guarantee that power relations will be fundamentally altered. In fact, she ventures that it was the democratic process of negotiation between students and teachers, as much as the resultant shift in teaching practice, that altered power relations in the Kamehameha educational programme. For this reason, she argues that for any school to effectively promote social equality it must move beyond what she terms the ‘methods fetish’ and refocus attention on local epistemologies, human relations and power structures in the classroom.

Attending to local epistemologies and student-teacher interactions locates LEP in a more explicitly socio-political terrain. Indeed, there are clear parallels with the educational philosophy of Critical Pedagogy, as espoused by Freire (1996), with its commitment to a democratic and emancipatory form of schooling. Working from a similar point of departure as Bourdieu (1990) (see section 3.8.1 above), proponents of Critical Pedagogy recognise the school as an institution that is infused with cultural capital and implicated in the reproduction of asymmetric societal power structures, where alternative ways of being are devalued and discriminated. Yet in contrast to the determinism of Bourdieu, Critical Pedagogy focuses on teachers’ capacity to subvert these structures, empowering marginalised students by dignifying the alternative languages and cultures that they bring to the classroom. Dialogue between students and teachers form a central component in

this process of legitimation, creating a third-space in which students may transform from objects of education to subjects. Through this process the school becomes a ‘terrain of on-going cultural struggle over what is accepted as legitimate knowledge’ (Darder et al., 2003, p. 10).

Working from a similar view of linguistic minority education, Cummins (2001) describes how interactions that take place between student and teacher translate into either coercive or collaborative relations of power. While coercive relations reinforce hegemonic structures, collaborative relations stem from teachers’ respect for the ‘cultural, linguistic, imaginative, and intellectual resources that children bring to school’ and their willingness to incorporate these into the classroom (Cummins, 2001, p. 653). For Cummins, this type of collaborative relationship constitutes an empowering and transformative pedagogy, in which dominant ideologies can be challenged and where students may re-define social equality in their own terms, participating ‘actively and critically in the democratic process in pursuit of the ideals of social justice and equality’ (Cummins, 2001, p. 48).

The preceding discussion on the importance of human relations in the classroom establishes teachers as de facto language planners in their own right. As Lo Bianco (2010) highlights, teachers’ pedagogical choices and day-to-day language practices convey ideological content and create rules and norms for language use, which may either reflect wider societal practices or challenge them. The significance of this ‘unplanned language planning’ (Eggington, 2002) which resides in every-day language practices has tended to be obscured by the dominant notion of language planning as an official, organised and deliberate effort to affect change in a language (Cooper, 1989). Yet Spolsky (2008) regards unplanned planning as the most influential form of LPP. Moreover, given the socialising function of schools, this type of unsanctioned, implicit LPP assumes particular significance when it occurs in the classroom. As Lo Bianco (2010) describes, teachers assume the role of *in loco parentis*, not only in their legal capacity but also in their role as socialisers and educators. Consequently, ‘individual teachers enact communicative, pedagogic and ideological decisions which can entrench lifelong patterns of communication skill, identity and ability’ (Lo Bianco, 2010, p. 163).



This statement holds particular relevance in the context of deaf education, where children typically begin their schooling with very limited linguistic and social experience.

This section has examined mother-tongue education's capacity to promote social justice for linguistic minorities. It was suggested that LEP that attends solely to language issues and technical implementation of policy may do little to challenge the dominant societal power relations at the heart of social exclusion; simply introducing a minority language into the classroom offers scant recourse to social justice. Crucially, the technocratic approach to mother tongue LEP adheres to the same neo-classical principles as top-down assimilative policies, uprooting language from its socio-political context and rendering societal power relations invisible. In recognition of this, a more transformative approach was described, with local epistemologies and democratic student-teacher relations at its heart.

The next section extends the discussion through a critique of the language rights paradigm, which has underpinned the majority of calls for linguistic equality and mother-tongue education. Following a deconstruction of the rights model, an alternative approach to LPP and LEP is suggested, which is centered on a distinct notion of citizenship.

### **3.9. Deconstructing the language rights paradigm**

The language rights paradigm has become ubiquitous, providing linguistic minorities around the world with a significant moral and legal mechanism for challenging linguistic discrimination and securing linguistically accessible public services. However, the framework is beset with practical and conceptual problems and has become the object of increasing scrutiny and critique from scholars aligned with fields such as postmodern and critical language studies, who question its capacity to achieve equality (see Freeland and Patrick, 2004; Stroud, 2001; Stroud and Heugh, 2004; Wee, 2011). The following section considers some of the practical barriers to securing rights, before exploring the paradigm's more fundamental flaws.

### **3.9.1. Practical barriers to obtaining language rights**

The most obvious practical challenge facing the language rights approach is its dependence on the state; governments must be willing to grant and enforce rights, yet monolingual language policy has been central to nation-building, with linguistic diversity often regarded as a barrier to national unity (for example, see Chapter 2 on Myanmar's history of LPP). As Wee (2011) states, a central paradox of the language rights model is its reliance on the very institution that has typically been responsible for linguistic subjugation. With the dominant group often reluctant to grant rights for fear of ceding their privileged status, Grin (2005, p. 448) notes that claims are 'constrained by the extent to which the underpinning moral considerations are shared by public opinion and politicians'.

Even when rights are recognised by a government, their implementation may be hindered by what is considered to be a lack of practical feasibility, ineffective enforcement mechanisms or a paucity of economic resources (Grin, 2005; Rubagumya et al., 2011). As Stroud (2001) points out, a number of linguistic minorities in South Africa have been granted official language status under a rights-based paradigm, but have no way of exercising their rights. Similarly, McKee and Manning (2015) describe the failure of the New Zealand Sign Language Act to deliver any tangible economic or political benefits to the deaf community. Conferring New Zealand Sign Language with official language status in 2006, the Act aimed to reverse deaf people's marginalisation by securing their access to public services and providing linguistically accessible education. Yet, insufficient resources and a lack of robust implementation methods meant that these objectives were not achieved.

### **3.9.2. Fundamental flaws of the rights paradigm**

In addition to practical constraints, the language rights paradigm is characterised by a number of fundamental flaws that inhibit equality and may in fact compound the marginalisation of linguistic minorities. For Stroud (2001), the most troubling aspect of relying solely on a language rights approach lies in its failure to engage directly with the root cause of marginalisation, and thus its improbability of achieving substantive change.

Distinguishing between affirmative and transformative approaches to social justice, Fraser (1995, p. 82) states:

By affirmative remedies for injustice I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes of social arrangements without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them. By transformative remedies, in contrast, I mean remedies aimed at correcting inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework

For Stroud (2001), the language rights paradigm falls clearly into the category of affirmative approaches, aiming to tackle inequality through compensatory forms of redress while leaving deep-seated marginalising structures intact; although linguistic minorities are clearly disadvantaged by inadequate linguistic provisions in their mother tongue, they are also marginalised by deeper rooted social patterns of representation that stigmatise and oppress.

In fact, by claiming language rights, linguistic minorities risk further stigmatisation. As Fraser (1995) observes, a perverse facet of the affirmative, rights-based approach to equality is that groups must emphasise their differences; with only limited social, economic and political resources available, communities must draw attention to their unique need for protection (May, 2015). Not only can this be socially divisive, encouraging a culture of competition (Stroud, 2001; Stroud and Heugh, 2004), but over time it can also have a disempowering effect, portraying communities as deficient and thus magnifying their social alienation. For example, Brooten (2004) notes how an emerging human rights discourse amongst Karen refugees on the Thai-Myanmar border is seen as problematic by some, compounding dominant discourses of victimhood and denying the community agency and positive representation. In this way Herath (2015, p. 258) describes how a rights-based approach to equality risks relegating linguistic minorities to the role of passive recipients, thus reinforcing hierarchical social relations.

It's position within a legal framework means that the rights paradigm is also susceptible to the 'essentializing proclivities' of the law (Cowan et al., 2001, pp. 10–11), which demand clearly circumscribed and context-neutral categories in order to identify potential beneficiaries and assess when violations have occurred. As Wee (2011, p. 21) states, 'boundary marking and essentialism are inescapable features of the discourse of rights'. Consequently, many minority groups have embraced strategic essentialism, presenting romanticised representations of their cultural life in an attempt to secure legal protections (Cowan et al., 2001). Similarly, in order to claim language rights linguistic minorities must acquiesce to received understandings of categories such as 'language' and 'mother-tongue' as well as dominant ideologies which postulate a primordial link between language and identity (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). As Wee (2011) and Stroud (2001) note, these dominant classifications have typically viewed language as a discrete ontological entity with sufficient internal unity and consistency that it may be objectively identified according to its formal linguistic properties. Yet, as discussed earlier in section 3.5.1, these authoritative definitions of language have not always held relevance for communities, who often regard language as a fluid and contextualised socio-cultural practice (Canagarajah, 2007; Freeland and Patrick, 2004; Lüpke and Storch, 2013; Woolard and Schieffelin, 1994).

As Freeland and Patrick (2004, p. 1) assert, language rights are 'fraught with complications and contradictions... with sometimes counterproductive effects'. In order to better understand these unintended consequences they call for more empirical research that examines the way in which language, equality, and rights interact with socio-linguistic realities on the ground. As Cowan et al. (2001, pp. 1–2) assert, a scholarly forum is required in which 'theoretical explorations of rights, citizenship and related concepts can engage with empirical, contextual studies of rights processes'. Studies of this kind, however, remain relatively scarce. The following discussion considers some existing examples of research in this area.

In the context of Corsican language planning and policy, Jaffe (2011, 1999) highlights some potential political ramifications of drawing on essentialist discourses when

promoting minority languages. As she notes, in Corsica the struggle for legitimisation and equality has led to two models of language activism, each with distinct ideas on influencing public opinion and shaping policy. The ‘purist’ approach, which has much in common with the rights framework, aligns itself with dominant French nationalist discourse. In this way, campaigners assert an innate link between language and identity in their plight for recognition and equality. This group has made significant gains, including the production of orthographies and learning materials, as well as developing more positive attitudes towards the language. Yet the campaign has also undermined the cohesiveness of the community. As Jaffe notes, ideologies of linguistic purity have developed as a corollary to rights claims that are posited on an essential link between language and identity. Yet these ideologies have in fact stigmatised the many individuals whose language practices are seen to be deviant, such that the cultural identity of non-speakers, semi-speakers, and speakers who use contact forms is rendered illegitimate. As Stroud (2010) highlights, contestation regarding the cultural authenticity of group members is a common consequence of the rights model.

In response, a more subversive movement emerged in Corsica, aimed at fundamentally changing the dominant public discourse on language. In contrast to the focus on linguistic purity, this alternative model revolves around the concept of *polynomie*, which regards language as:

an abstract entity, which users recognize in multiple modes of existence, all of which are equally tolerated and are not distinguished hierarchically or by functional specialization. It is accompanied by tolerance of phonological and morphological variation by users, who also view lexical diversity as a form of richness (Jaffe, 2007, p. 65).

Under this paradigm, language is perceived as a social and political activity, as opposed to an object (as described in section 3.5.1 of this chapter). Moreover, links between language and identity are not seen as essential, but are regarded as the product of social and political interaction. Nevertheless, against a backdrop of dominant societal

ideologies, Jaffe notes that this approach has struggled to gain the same leverage as its purist, rights-based, counterpart. As a result, language planners in Corsica are faced with the difficult task of reconciling the political efficacy of essentialist discourses with the symbolic violence that this approach inflicts on the plurality of linguistic practices in the community.

Similarly, with regard to the universal implementation of language rights policy in the multilingual Caribbean coastal zone of Nicaragua, Freeland (2013, p. 107) describes how: '[the] race to equality has brought only disparity, inequality and division'. In response to calls from ethnic and minority groups, a comprehensive framework of language rights was ratified, including the guarantee of mother-tongue education for all. Yet discrepancies between official and community ideologies, and what Freeland refers to as the 'treacherously polysemic' nature of the term 'mother-tongue', have in fact hampered the socio-linguistic equality of many groups. The essentialist assumption held by legislators that the mother-tongue would correspond to the first learned and most frequently used language of a group, and be synonymous with their cultural affiliation, could not account for the reality of cross cultural relations, multilingualism and the legacy of colonialism in the area. As Freeland highlights, in this context the first learned language of a community is often not the ethnic language. Moreover, as a consequence of associating the mother tongue with the primary language of communication, the colonial language was designated as the official language of education for many groups. With the universal policy benefitting certain groups more than others, Freeland describes how a culture of competition and resentment emerged in the area. Thus, as a result of distinct ideological frameworks and legislators' essentialist reading of 'mother tongue' described above, the language rights policy actually served to distance many communities from their ethnic language, creating social factions in the process.

As Rubagumya et al. (2011) argue, the common assumption that a linguistic group will automatically use or identify with the traditional language fails to capture the complex make-up of many communities. Moreover, by conforming to prevailing ideologies which posit an innate relationship between language and identity, the rights paradigm devalues

alternative ways of being and excludes those who are not seen to conform, such as urban indigenous people or those who are second language speakers (Makoni and Pennycook, 2007). Indeed, with its potential to upset internal group dynamics and further stigmatise those who do not conform to ‘standard’ linguistic practices, Stroud (2010) argues that a rights-based approach may in fact spark ethnic tension, a point also noted by Ruiz (1984). As Petrovic (2010, pp. 202–203) states:

[the language rights approach] offers minorities a very limited political space and privileges a select set of semiotic practices for how marginalized speakers may express themselves and be heard...these aspects of rights discourse disadvantage significant factions of speakers who subsequently lack agency and voice.

### **3.10. Cultural and linguistic citizenship: an alternative political framework for linguistic minorities**

While its alignment to the dominant political framework has afforded the language rights model significant traction, its situation within a liberal model of democracy is, in many ways, the paradigm’s greatest failing. Consequently, a number of scholars have looked to alternative political models of citizenship that are better suited to addressing issues of language, culture and social justice. Accordingly, the concept of *cultural citizenship* emerged in the late 1990s and gained significant currency as a more substantial and far-reaching framework, which was later followed by the closely related notion of linguistic citizenship.

For Pakulski (1997, p. 80), cultural citizenship comprises ‘the right to symbolic presence, dignifying representation, propagation of identity and maintenance of lifestyles’ and includes ‘unhindered representation, recognition without marginalisation, acceptance and integration without “normalising” distortion’. Delanty (2002, p. 64) takes the concept further, focusing on its transformative capacity and the importance of constructing new meanings through collective societal learning. As he states:

[T]he power to name, create meaning, construct personal biographies and narratives by gaining control over the flow of information, goods and cultural processes is an important dimension of citizenship as an active process.

Hensbroek's (2010) notion of 'co-authorship' also emphasises the importance of voice and a community's capacity to influence the general cultural consensus and challenge or reinterpret hegemonic representations of the group. Cultural freedom that occurs without this co-authorship, he argues, is an inherently deficient form of citizenship.

In an attempt to extend the meaning of citizenship to accommodate language issues, Stroud (2001) introduces the concept of linguistic citizenship. Based on a similar set of principles as cultural citizenship, Stroud emphasises the centrality of community voice and agency, focusing on how language users may 'exercise control over their language, deciding *what* languages are and what they may *mean*' (p. 253). Thus, linguistic citizenship represents a transformative approach to social justice in which hegemonic and essentialising assumptions regarding language and group identity are challenged through dialogue and negotiation.

As Petrovik (2010) states, linguistic citizenship draws heavily on the concept of deliberative democracy, a political theory that is concerned primarily with the power of public reasoning and dialogue to promote engagement with alternative perspectives and encourage reflection on previously held opinions (see Bohman, 1998; Dryzek, 2000). The process of deliberation can occur in a wide range of interactional contexts. As Dryzek (2000, pp. 1–2) states, 'the only condition for authentic deliberation is that communication induce reflection upon preferences in a non-coercive fashion'. Indeed, with its concern for introducing alternative representations into the social sphere, Wee (2011) considers deliberative democracy to be particularly well suited to matters concerning linguistic discrimination and inequality. As Kymlicka and Patten (2003, p. 15) argue, if linguistic minorities are to exercise any genuine social influence it will be the result of 'participating in the formation of public opinion', as opposed to legal privileges.



While concepts such as linguistic citizenship and deliberative democracy present a more subversive and radical approach to equality, they have not yet attracted the attention of many linguistic minorities, who remain overwhelmingly focused on obtaining formal language rights. As Wee (2011) notes, the rights paradigm remains appealing, providing groups with a well-defined process and tangible outcomes. Furthermore, the notion of linguistic citizenship has prompted criticism from some, who believe that this approach to equality may distract from the need for economic equality and the significance of rights legislation in order to secure linguistic resources. Yet pursuing linguistic citizenship does not necessarily preclude language rights. Indeed, Stroud (2001) and Freeland (2013) argue that the utility of language rights is dependent on dismantling and reconstituting the concept of language in light of local epistemologies and ideologies. Similarly, Habermas (1994) states that minority rights can only deliver meaningful equality when the terms are authored by potential claimants; until groups are able to participate at all levels of society and can determine the particulars of any legal protections they require, the rights-based approach will remain fundamentally inadequate.

### **3.11. Accounting for community understandings of citizenship in LPP research**

The preceding discussion has drawn attention to the way in which distinct models of citizenship and democracy underpin different approaches to tackling linguistic discrimination and promoting social justice. As Stroud (2010) states, discussions on language issues always form part of a broader dialogue on citizenship. Nevertheless, ethnographic LPP research has tended to focus predominantly on ideologies of language, with little attention paid to the broader spectrum of community beliefs and values regarding the nature of equality and social participation. This final section of the literature review argues for a more comprehensive and multidisciplinary approach to researching LPP that attends to local ideologies of language *and* citizenship.

For example, with reference to mother-tongue adult literacy classes across in Senegal, Trudell and Klass (2010) note that a desire for full citizenship has motivated the

development of these programmes, despite what they describe as the apparent incompatibility of these two objectives:

Common-sense thinking regarding language attitudes and language development holds that one or the other of these motivations should generally hold sway in a given minority language community. Either the community members are keen to keep their linguistic heritage in the face of globalisation and cultural assimilation, or they are keen to improve economic and social prospects for themselves and their children by integrating into the wider national (and official language-speaking) society (p. 128).

Yet, the simultaneous desire for cultural maintenance and full citizenship is only surprising if the meaning of citizenship is assumed to be synonymous with assimilation. In fact, the meaning of citizenship is contestable, and defined in local contexts. As Parekh (2004) states, different groups have distinct ideas about the nature of justice.

Lopez's (2008) study of bilingual indigenous education programmes in Latin America clearly highlights how understanding a community's conceptualisation of citizenship can clarify the aims of mother-tongue education. While the widespread implementation of indigenous language education programmes across the region represented a welcome departure from oppressive monolingual policies, Lopez describes a growing criticism of these programmes from within indigenous communities themselves. Objections stemmed largely from issues relating to citizenship: 'controversies and unresolved demands that question the uniform nature of the nation-state and the homogenous understanding of citizenship' (Lopez, 2008, p. 46). In particular, indigenous people stressed the need for programmes to permeate wider society, as opposed to taking a compensatory approach to bilingual education, so that the Hispanic populations may learn about indigenous languages and ways of being. Notably, indigenous leaders viewed citizenship as a process of dialogue and mutual learning. In this way, their argument echoes the tenets of linguistic citizenship and deliberative democracy, with schools seen as sites for developing a plural and heterogeneous form of education and 'constructing an ethnic

citizenship alongside and complementary to the national citizenship' (Lopez, 2008, p. 61).

Extending the scope of ethnographic research beyond language ideologies may also offer insight into what could otherwise present as contradictions and inconsistencies in research findings. As Dobrin (2014) asserts in relation to her research on language endangerment and revitalisation in the Sepik region of New Guinea, linguists should deal with the full ambit of beliefs and values held by a community, which may complement, or contradict, their language ideologies:

[I]deological stances that bear on language may be grounded in implicit cultural assumptions that are not necessarily focused on language as such, but instead on more fundamental notions about how the social world works (Dobrin, 2014, p. 126).

Illustrating this, Dobrin describes how, despite positive attitudes towards the local Arapesh language, a significant shift to the Tok Pisin language has occurred. This, she ventures, may be explained by broader cultural paradigms that operate within the area, whereby mastery of other languages forms an integral aspect of social identity without deflecting from the positive attitudes held towards the local language. In particular, Dobrin describes Arapesh as an 'importing culture' where significant value is attributed to things associated with outside cultures and where appropriation of 'foreign' objects, whether tangible or intangible, indicates political sophistication and high social standing. This cultural logic extends to language, to such a degree that a community's most prized oral texts are often in non-local languages from neighbouring communities with whom they occasionally come into contact. Observing this cultural pattern, Dobrin describes how the profound shift to Tok Pisin may not relate to language attitudes per se. Rather, she suggests, it is the result of cultural logic in overdrive, given communities' recent unfettered access to Tok Pisin. To the extent that communities have complex and often competing interests and priorities, Dobrin's research clearly highlights the importance of analyzing language issues in relation to the community's wider web of beliefs and values.

### 3.12. Chapter conclusion

This chapter has presented a comprehensive and critical review of the existing academic literature as it relates to the main themes of this study. The traditional view of LPP as a neutral intervention aimed at remedying the problems of linguistic diversity was disputed, along with its positivistic conceptualisation of language as an extant and delimitable entity. It was suggested that the structural approach to classifying and enumerating languages is not an objective or neutral endeavour, but an artifact of colonial encounters, stemming from the desire to impose order on linguistic diversity. It was further argued that adhering to the structural linguistics paradigm abstracts language from its social context, masking the socio-political motivations of LPP and concealing its oppressive potential. Moreover, by regarding structural classifications of language as scientific fact, policy makers have tended to disregard local conceptualisations of language and dismiss the importance of community ideologies.

In contrast to the traditional view of LPP as a primarily technical undertaking, it was argued that LPP in fact represents a dynamic socio-cultural process in which communities have the capacity to interpret and negotiate top-down policy. In order to understand community responses to official policy and examine local conceptualisations of language, an ethnographic approach to LPP research was advocated.

Having considered the oppressive potential of official top-down policy, discussion then focused on the capacity of LPP to alleviate these pernicious effects and reverse the marginalisation of linguistic minorities. Particular attention was given to the rise of mother-tongue education programmes and the concept of language rights, both of which have gained popularity amongst many minority groups and scholars. While the importance of mother-tongue education and legal protections was not dismissed, it was argued that their capacity to affect meaningful social change has been restricted by an adherence to the same epistemological view of language as top-down LPP; by abstracting language from its socio-political context and focusing primarily on the technical aspects of these grass-roots initiatives, attempts to promote linguistic equality have failed to challenge the dominant ideologies and asymmetric power structures that underlie the

social marginalisation of linguistic minorities. Instead, the concept of linguistic citizenship was put forward as a more transformative approach to achieving linguistic equality in which the dominant social framework is dismantled and re-constructed from the bottom up. In order to affect this type of substantive change it was argued that linguistic minorities must have the right to define their language and its social meanings, challenging hegemonic representations and subverting the dominant social structure.

Finally, while ethnographic LPP researchers have paid significant attention to local language ideologies, it was suggested that insufficient consideration has been given to the wider framework of beliefs and ideologies that operate within communities. Noting that discussions on language planning and policy form part of a wider discourse on citizenship and equality, it was argued that LPP research should also account for community views regarding the social world and their place within it.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

This chapter begins with a description of the initial research questions and the way in which these evolved over the course of the fieldwork. The epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the study are then presented, followed by a description of the research methodology and the reasons for combining ethnography with grounded theory. I then document the ten months that I spent conducting fieldwork in Yangon, detailing the research methods employed and the way in which the resulting data was analyzed. Throughout the discussion I reflect on a range of practical and philosophical issues that emerged over the course of the fieldwork.

### **4.2. The research questions**

Initially, the research project aimed to study community responses to the Sign Language Standardisation Project taking place in Myanmar. In order to explore this I produced a preliminary set of research questions before embarking on fieldwork. These included:

- What level of awareness do deaf people have of linguistic variation in the country?
- Do they conceive of one or two or more sign languages in Myanmar?
- How much contact is there between the Yangon and Mandalay deaf communities?
- Do people feel that they belong to a deaf community? If so, is language an important aspect of community membership?
- Do signers consider a national deaf community to exist?

- Is linguistic variation viewed as an obstacle to the coherence of this community?
- Do signers view linguistic variation as being important to identity?
- How do deaf people think language standardisation will affect them?

While these initial questions formed a useful starting point, my inductive approach to research led me to pursue additional and unforeseen avenues of enquiry over the course of the fieldwork. As McCarty (2015) states, ethnographic research questions are both open-ended and subject to change, evolving in response to ongoing analysis and reflection. Indeed, for Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) there is an ethical imperative to take a flexible approach to the research questions. As she states, researchers should not assume that their questions are understood or valued in the same way by the community they're working with: rigid adherence to the researcher's original agenda not only risks producing a deficient analysis that is lacking in local insight, but also serves to reinforce unequal power relations between researchers and community members.

As the fieldwork progressed and I came to understand deaf life in Yangon more clearly, I realised that a meaningful analysis of community responses to language standardisation would only be possible if I understood language planning at the local level. I therefore spent a significant proportion of my time in the field researching unofficial LPP in the deaf community, as well as LEP in the Mary Chapman School. Moreover, in order to develop a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of these different levels of language planning and policy, I realised that I would also need to account for the wider socio-political context. Therefore, in addition to probing language issues, I also sought to explore deaf people's experiences of growing up, their relationships with family and friends, their experiences of attending school, their interactions with the general public and their understanding of equality and social justice. As Forsey (2010) states, by taking a biographical approach and attending to participants' wider social and cultural milieu, researchers can develop a deeper, more intricate understanding of the research topic.

### **4.3. Epistemology, ontology and researcher reflexivity**

In order to contextualise this chapter's discussion of research methods, the following section briefly describes the philosophical tenets of the study. As Bryman (2012) highlights, the decision to employ certain research methods is not made in a vacuum. In addition to the various practical considerations that may affect method selection, the choice is also influenced by ontological and epistemological beliefs regarding the nature of social reality and how we may come to know about it.

Predicated on the belief that knowledge is a matter of subjectivity and interpretation, this research project assumes an interpretivist epistemological viewpoint. This philosophical stance developed primarily in response to a mounting disenchantment with the dominant positivist paradigm and its application of scientific methods to the social world. In contrast, interpretivism regards social knowledge as particular to the context in which it emerges. Closely related to this view, the research is also informed by social constructivism. According to this ontological perspective there is no external social reality. Instead the social world is understood to be in a continual process of construction and reconstruction as people discursively negotiate the world around them and their social experiences within it. According to these philosophical viewpoints, conducting research is not a neutral or objective process. As Cromwell (2003) states, social research that poses as neutral scientific fact has the potential to stigmatise. Indeed, Lane (1992) describes the way in which supposedly objective social research has presented deaf people as cognitively and emotionally deficient, compounding the pathological view of deafness and the societal marginalisation of deaf people.

This research project also accepts that the researcher will exert an inevitable influence on the study. As Berger (2015) states, a researcher's social position affects access to the field, their relationship with participants, and the way in which they construct knowledge. This influences what they choose to observe, the questions they ask and the way in which they interpret the data. For these reasons the findings presented in this study represent a collaborative production, jointly constructed by both the participants and myself during the fieldwork. The final write up represents my own interpretation of the topic, although



the inclusion of participant quotes attempts to bring out ‘the voices of the study people’ as much as possible<sup>31</sup> (Pelto, 2013, p. 302) (see section 4.11 for a discussion regarding the use of English translations).

While researcher effects can be minimised and monitored, Hammersley and Atkinson (2010, p. 16) argue that, ‘rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher completely, we should set about understanding them’. To this extent, a reflexive approach has been adopted in this study, which Berger (2015, p. 220) describes as a:

process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher’s positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome.

#### **4.4. An ethnographic approach to LPP research**

This section briefly re-iterates the rationale for selecting ethnography as the methodology of the study. As described in the Literature Review, language planning and policy research has broadened its analytic scope in recent years, with researchers increasingly examining LPP at the local community level, along with the way in which the micro, meso and macro levels of policy interact. Most notably, ethnography has been proffered as an approach capable of illuminating local interpretations and implementations of policy, attending to the ‘complex of practices, ideologies, attitudes, and formal and informal mechanisms that influence people’s language choices in profound and pervasive ways’ (Teresa L. McCarty, 2011a, p. xiii). An ethnographic methodology is also advocated by Hornberger and Johnson (2007), who describe its utility in examining how top-down policy plays out in specific contexts. Indeed, Martin-Jones, et al. (2017) note how ethnography is well suited to sociolinguistic research in general, enabling researchers to track social and ideological processes in a community and develop an

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<sup>31</sup> In the findings chapters participant quotes are followed by a unique participant ID code. Codes prefixed with a ‘D’ indicate a deaf participant, ‘P’ refers to a parent or carer, and ‘T’ refers to a teacher. Participant metadata is presented in Appendix 1.

understanding of their local significance. As described in Chapters 1 and 3, this study considers ethnographic research to have an inherent critical capacity, drawing attention to unjust processes and challenging dominant and marginalising epistemologies.<sup>32</sup>

It should be noted that definitions of ethnography are variable and often contested amongst researchers (Atkinson et al., 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010; Packer, 2011). Indeed, amidst this ambiguity Bryman (2012) and Forsey (2010) note a growing tendency to regard ethnography as cognate with a single method: participant observation. For Forsey (2010) this association stems from the anthropological origins of ethnography and the disciplinary ideal of living amongst participants over an extended period of time. Yet this type of sustained participant observation is not feasible in many communities, and Forsey argues that fixation on this particular method may in fact impoverish research. Crucially, socio-spatial arrangements in the Yangon deaf community, where people do not typically live or work together, meant that it was not practicable to rely exclusively on participant observation for this research project.

Despite the privileged position that participant observation has come to occupy, Bryman (2012) and Forsey (2010) both emphasise the legitimacy of other methods in ethnographic research, such as interviews and document analysis. Nevertheless, rather than focusing on *how* ethnography is conducted, Forsey (2010) proposes an alternative definition that centers on the purposes of ethnographic research. To this extent, he emphasises the importance of ‘engaged listening’, stating that:

The aim of the ethnographer is to listen deeply to and/or to observe as closely as possible the beliefs, the values, the material conditions and structural forces that underwrite the socially patterned behaviours of all human beings and the meanings people attach to these conditions and force (p. 567)

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<sup>32</sup> As noted in the Introduction, critical ethnography has been defined as conventional ethnography with a political purpose (Thomas, 1993). Accordingly, the term ‘ethnography’ will be used in the majority of this thesis, unless specifically discussing the critical potential of the methodology.

This alternative definition, he asserts, encourages a more flexible approach to ethnographic research; judging research on its aims and outcomes as opposed to fixating on the technicalities of fieldwork allows researchers to select the most appropriate methods for their specific research site. The various methods that were employed in this research project are described later in section 4.6.

#### **4.5. Combining ethnography with grounded theory**

Additional concerns regarding ethnography have focused on its descriptive nature, with criticisms regarding a lack of systemic analysis and inadequate attention to theory frequently levelled at the methodology (e.g. see Snow et al., 2003). Indeed, while recognizing ethnography's strength in representing human experience, Willis and Trondman (2000) argue for a more theoretically informed approach to ethnography so that research may surpass description in order to maximally illuminate the topic of study and its wider significance. To ensure that this research project is rich in description as well as being theoretically incisive, strategies from grounded theory were incorporated into the ethnographic methodology.

While distinct branches of grounded theory have developed since Glaser and Strauss' seminal text in 1967, all are characterised by their commitment to constant comparative analysis and theoretical sampling. As Charmaz and Mitchell (2007) describe, grounded theory takes an iterative approach to data collection and analysis, with the two processes occurring simultaneously and in a constant dialectic with each other. As a result of this continual process of coding, certain themes start to develop from the data, which then guide subsequent data collection. Indeed, this iterative process of moving between data collection and data analysis is at the heart of theoretical sampling, whereby the researcher recruits particular types of participants whilst working to elaborate and refine emerging codes, leading eventually to the formulation of a robust theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014).

While ethnography and grounded theory represent two distinct research paradigms, their complementary potential is noted by Charmaz and Mitchell (2007), who argue that grounded theory can add rigor to ethnography, helping to focus its sometimes unwieldy and descriptive nature to make it more theoretically incisive. As Charmaz and Mitchell (2007, p. 260) asserts '[g]rounded theory methods move ethnographic research toward theoretical development by raising description to abstract categories and theoretical interpretation'. Conversely, ethnography's commitment to providing an intricate account of the local context offers protection against the instant theorising and objectification of data that is commonly associated with grounded theory.

#### **4.6. The research process**

Fieldwork in Yangon was conducted over a total of ten months, divided into two periods: from October 2014 to February 2015, and from May 2015 to September 2015. In order to address the research questions, multiple methods were employed, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Rather than aiming to verify the reliability of the data through methodological crosschecking, the combination of various methods was intended to add texture, depth and complexity to the research findings, resulting in 'a set of fluid, interconnected images and representations' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005, p. 7). The different stages of fieldwork are detailed below. While these are presented in a linear order, it should be noted that many aspects of the research process were ongoing and iterative.

##### **4.6.1. Gaining access to the community and the Mary Chapman School**

While gaining access to a research setting is typically associated with the very early stages of research, Hammersley and Atkinson (2010) describe it as a full time occupation that spans the duration of the fieldwork. This was certainly true of my research in Yangon, where various leads and emergent themes led me to make contact with a range of institutions and community groups. In addition to the continual process of negotiating access to a variety of settings I also considered it important to develop and maintain close relationships with a few 'key gatekeepers' both in the deaf community and at the Mary

Chapman School, the two main foci of the fieldwork. The following account describes the process of gaining access in more detail, illustrating the way in which these trusting partnerships facilitated a level of access that would have otherwise been impossible.

Four months prior to starting my fieldwork I visited Yangon for a two-week period. During this time I started to familiarise myself with the city and also worked to initiate contact with deaf people, including one man who had been introduced to me by my supervisor. I instigated a number of meetings with this man and his deaf friend, which allowed me to introduce myself, explain my research interests and to develop some initial connections with the community. Indeed, on returning to Yangon in September 2014 I re-established contact with this pair and together we visited other members of the deaf community in their homes, workplaces and favourite teashops.

It was during these initial forays into the community that I met with a hospitable deaf woman in her early fifties, an active member of the community who would become a key person in the research, assuming multiple roles including that of gatekeeper, unofficial research assistance and research participant. Over time we developed a trusting relationship and I spent many hours at her home in downtown Yangon chatting about various aspects of community life. In addition to providing valuable cultural insight she also acted as a gatekeeper for community events, inviting me to attend numerous gatherings where I was warmly welcomed thanks to her popularity and close relationship with a wide circle of deaf people.

In contrast to the relatively organic process of entering into the deaf community, gaining access to the Mary Chapman School required a more formal approach. Two weeks after arriving in Yangon I arranged to visit the school, and on a Monday morning in mid-October I met with School Principal Daw Nyunt Nyunt Thein and Deputy Head Naw Lily Htoo in their office. During this initial meeting I explained my plans for fieldwork and expressed an interest in conducting participant observation at the school. While I had anticipated that negotiating access to a large institution such as the school might be challenging, I found that both women responded positively to my proposal, giving me

permission to attend the school as often as I wanted, encouraging me to talk to teachers and students, and independently raising the possibility of conducting interviews at the school. Indeed, the school administration played a central role in organising interviews and focus groups, described in more detail in section 4.6.4.1.

Their enthusiasm for the research and the ease with which I was able to gain access to the school may be partly attributable to its NGO status. While government approval must be obtained in order to visit state run schools there is no such requirement at the Mary Chapman School, and it was not unusual to see guests being shown around the compound. Indeed, as a charitable organisation reliant on donations, the school administration was keen to increase its visibility and raise awareness of their cause. To this extent, both Daw Nyunt Nyunt Thein and Naw Lily Htoo emphasised the need for more research into deaf issues, and deaf education in particular, which they regarded as a neglected area.

While the school was enthusiastic about the research, it was important not to take access for granted. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2010) point out, even when access to a setting has been agreed, gatekeepers may nevertheless block certain avenues of inquiry or steer researchers in particular directions as they seek to protect the image of their organisation. Indeed, when the school Principal suggested that I begin by spending time in the handicraft room rather than in the classrooms I realised that certain areas of the school would not necessarily be open to me during the early stages of fieldwork. Consequently, I decided to re-visit the possibility of observing classes at a later date, once familiarity and trust had been established. Indeed, when our relationship had developed the Principal gave me permission to attend any class in the school, although I always made sure to seek the approval of individual teachers.

While I was keen to gain insight into different aspects of school life, the handicraft room proved to be a particularly fertile site for participant observation. It also brought me into contact with a deaf woman in her late forties who supervised the room and was renowned not only for her involvement in the school, but also for her linguistic prowess and ability

to communicate with deaf signers of all ages (see Chapter 2, section 2.12 on generational differences in signing). Unwavering in her willingness to answer my questions on community life, she became another key person in the research, inviting me to a wide range of community gatherings and events over the course of the fieldwork and providing another entrée to the deaf community.

#### **4.6.2. Participant observation**

Participant observation was conducted throughout the fieldwork, resulting in what Geertz (1973) describes as a ‘thick description’ of community life. During the week the majority of my time was spent in the Mary Chapman School handicraft room (see Chapter 2, section 2.11) and, during the later stages of the fieldwork, observing taught classes. I also met with deaf people in the wider community, visiting them in their homes and workplaces, and in various teashops and deaf churches around the city. While most of my time was spent interacting with deaf people, I was also fortunate enough to be invited to the JICA office in Yangon, where I spent an afternoon discussing the language standardisation project. This led to a subsequent visit to the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) interpreter training school, providing another opportunity to find out about the official side of sign language planning and policy in Myanmar.

Initially, during the early stages of fieldwork, it was often hard to know where to focus my attention during participant observation. Over time, however, I found I was able to take a more focused approach, attending to behaviours and interactions that related to the emergent themes of the research. Yet even as I refined my observations in this way, it was necessary to alternate my gaze between these moments of particular theoretical interest and the wider context in which they occurred, striking the appropriate balance in what Wolcott (2005, p. 89) refers to as the ‘never-ending tension between taking a closer look at something versus taking a broader look at everything’.

As I conducted participant observation I made regular ‘jottings’ (Emerson et al., 2011), filling several small notebooks that I carried with me throughout the duration of the research. These consisted primarily of quickly scribbled words and abbreviated sentences, although in some instances they comprised more detailed notes. While these

served as invaluable prompts when writing up my fieldnotes in full, Emerson et al. (2011) refer to the taking of jottings as a possible source of tension in the research setting, temporarily removing the researcher from the moment and potentially arousing suspicion amongst participants. In order to satisfy people's curiosity and assuage any feelings of distrust I decided to be upfront about the purpose of these notes, explaining that I was recording what I saw and what people had told me so that I did not forget. I also used the same notebook for language learning purposes, frequently noting down a new sign or a word in Burmese for which I wanted to know the YSL equivalent. To this extent, participants quickly became accustomed to my note taking.

During the evenings I wrote up my fieldnotes in full, elaborating on my jottings to produce detailed written accounts. In order to try to make sense of what I had observed I often wrote theoretical memos alongside my fieldnotes. In these I drew links between observations, contemplated emerging themes, reflected on any challenges that had arisen, considered points for further investigation and thought about my own position in the research.

While my observations provided me with invaluable insight into community life and a wealth of rich data, the extent to which I was actually able to participate in the everyday activities and practices of the community was restricted by my status as a guest. People seemed happy for me to spend time with them, yet I struggled to involve myself in the full range of day-to-day community activities, such as cleaning or preparing drinks and food. Indeed, my attempts to participate in this way caused much bemusement and I was invariably told to 'sit down and relax'. Over time I started to suspect that persisting in the matter could upset community dynamics; allowing a guest to partake in activities that were typically delegated to younger members of the community could have compromised the community's reputation for hospitality, potentially resulting in a loss of face for participants. As Musante and DeWalt (2002, p. 27) point out, while researchers may strive to participate more fully in community life, often the role of 'learner or neophyte is the one most readily available to someone so clearly different'. To this extent, I spent a good deal of my time conducting what Patton (2002) refers to as the 'informal conversational interviews', spontaneously asking questions during natural conversation in



order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' social realities.

The restrictions imposed on my full participation forced me to reflect on my 'outsider' status. I was acutely aware, for example, that being Caucasian set me apart. Moreover, I recognised that as a hearing person I could not relate first hand to participants' experiences of deafness. As Kusters et al. (2017) point out, deaf participants may be more likely to 'open up' to a deaf researcher (see Kusters (2012) for an example of a deaf anthropologist's experience of conducting fieldwork in a deaf community). Other unanticipated aspects of my identity also proved to be conspicuous in the field and, while it was normal for people to ask me whether I was deaf and to enquire about my nationality, I found that people were equally curious about my religion and my marital status. In fact, my lack of religious affiliation and the fact that I was in a long-term relationship but not yet married appeared to create a greater obstacle to our mutual understanding than the fact that I was hearing.

While contemplating the insider/outsider divide promotes researcher reflexivity, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue that this binary concept is overly simplistic, failing to account for the complex nature of identity and the polysemous experiences that both researcher and participant bring to the field. To this extent, I found that my background in Deaf Studies, my knowledge of British Sign Language and my eagerness to learn about YSL and deaf life in Yangon appeared to inspire trust amongst participants; despite our various and often profound differences, people talked to me with surprising candor about their life experiences and opinions.

#### **4.6.3. Learning the language**

In order to successfully conduct participant observation it was essential to communicate in YSL, and a significant amount of my time in the field was spent learning the language. As the research progressed I was able to use YSL more confidently and develop a deeper understanding of deaf people's lives through conversation and observation. While acquiring YSL was a pre-requisite for conducting participant observation, the process of learning the language brought a number of additional and unanticipated benefits to the

research, helping me to bond with participants and providing me with insight into their language attitudes and ideologies.

As Everett (2001) points out, learning the local language is often conducive to building trusting and respectful friendships in the field, dismantling the traditional researcher-participant hierarchy and positioning the researcher in a subordinate role. Certainly, learning YSL served an important social function as I forged relationships with people during the initial stages of the fieldwork. Throughout the research, participants went to great lengths to help me learn the language, demonstrating significant patience and employing a range of communicative methods when I was unable to follow their signing. Moreover, deaf people appeared to take pride in teaching me their language and seeing my signing skills progress. To this extent it was common for participants to remark on how much my signing had advanced, talking gleefully and in rather overblown terms about my ‘fluency’ in the language. Yet, although I managed to reach a degree of proficiency in the language, my ability to communicate was restricted by the topic of conversation and my familiarity with the interlocutor. Because of this I was uncertain as to whether these statements regarding my fluency were simply intended as encouragement or if they perhaps reflected people’s limited expectations for outsiders learning the language. With YSL intimately connected to group identity (see Chapter 6, section 6.4) I also contemplated whether this type of commentary signalled a certain level of acceptance by the community as much as it pertained to my linguistic competence. Indeed, Jaffe (1999, p. 195) describes similar community statements regarding her fluency in Corsican as ‘a social performance that reflects, proposes, establishes, contests, or comments on social relationships’.

Learning the language also provided me with valuable insight into participants’ language attitudes and ideologies. When teaching me YSL, deaf people would often enter into debates regarding the suitability of particular signs. During these discussions it was common for participants to refer to the origins of each sign and why one variant was more authentic than another (see Chapter 6 for an in-depth discussion on linguistic

authenticity in the community). These conversations were included in my fieldnotes, orientating me towards topics for further investigation.

#### **4.6.4. Interviews and focus groups**

In addition to the informal conversational interviews conducted during participant observation, I also carried out 59 semi-structured interviews and 6 focus groups during the fieldwork. These sessions involved a total of 62 participants, including 41 deaf people, 10 parents and carers of deaf children, and 11 teachers from the Mary Chapman School (see appendix 1 for full table of participants). Six of the deaf participants were interviewed on more than one occasion. While deaf people's experiences and opinions were positioned centrally, I considered it important to include the voices of certain hearing stakeholders in the community. In this way I was able to develop a more comprehensive understanding of issues affecting the community and examine the role of teachers as de facto policy makers and language planners.

##### **4.6.4.1. Sampling and participant recruitment**

Participants for the first round of semi-structured interviews and focus groups were recruited in collaboration with the Mary Chapman School administration. During this early stage of fieldwork purposive sampling was used, whereby I sought out 'information rich cases' (Patton, 1990, p. 169) that would allow me to learn about issues of central importance to the research. In late November 2014 I attended a meeting at the school in order to outline the general topics that I was hoping to cover during the interviews, and to suggest a number of deaf people and teachers that I was keen to invite. The School Principal, Deputy Head and four attendant teachers then drew up a further list of potential participants who were selected on the basis of their active involvement in community

matters, relevant experiences and presumed interest in the research topics that I had described<sup>33</sup>.

As the research progressed I aimed for a more conceptually orientated approach to recruitment, employing theoretical sampling in order to find participants who could offer further insight into emerging analytic categories. This strategy proved effective during participant observation, where I was able to spontaneously instigate informal conversational interviews in response to the emerging theoretical analysis. However, this technique required a level of flexibility and control that was not always possible when organising the semi-structured interviews and focus groups. As Charmaz (2014, pp. 208–209) states, ‘textbook explanations of theoretical sampling seldom take into account interactional reciprocities and situational demands’.

In particular, working with gatekeepers meant that I was largely reliant on others to recruit interviewees and despite holding meetings to explain the evolving focus of the research and discuss potential participants I remained at an inevitable remove from the process. Issues related to timetabling presented a further obstacle to theoretical sampling; with prospective participants for each round of interviews typically recruited in advance, the extent to which I was able to select individual participants in response to the emerging codes and categories was limited. Furthermore, scheduling interviews at a mutually convenient time for both the participant and the interpreters meant that sessions were often held in close succession, and I regularly met with two people on the same day. This meant that my evenings were spent re-visiting participants’ responses in preparation for the next interview, noting down points of interest in a preliminary analysis; it was only

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<sup>33</sup> While sociolinguistic researchers have typically sought to recruit ‘native’ language users for their studies, this project did not recruit participants on this basis. As Costello and Landa (2008) state, the notion of a native language user can be problematic in sign language communities due to atypical patterns of language transmission and high levels of contact with the dominant spoken language. Similarly, Woolfe et al. (2010, p.1) state that ‘the majority of deaf children are not native signers; sign language exposure is typically late and inconsistent from hearing parents’. Given this study’s ethnographic approach and its focus on local ideologies of language, a decision was made to include any deaf signer who identified as a member of the Yangon deaf community, regardless of whether they might be considered ‘native’ signers. As recommended by Costello and Landa, metadata was collected for each participant (see Appendix 1).

during longer intervals between interviews, however, that I was able to code more comprehensively and begin refining the interview questions.

To this extent, the two-month break from the field presented me with a welcome opportunity to take stock of the data I had collected and reflect on emerging themes in greater depth. I returned to the field with a renewed sense of purpose and a clear understanding of what type of data I still needed to collect. Specifically, while deaf participants in the first round of interviews had been overwhelmingly from the younger generation, aged 35 and under, my later interviews focused on deaf people aged between 35 and 79, enabling me to pursue themes relating to generational differences in the community. These interviewees were recruited primarily through my two deaf research assistants, who were in close contact with this sector of the community. During an afternoon in the handicraft room the three of us discussed the aims of the interviews and compiled a list of potential participants, resulting in a second round of 22 interviews.

One final problem regarding this method of block scheduling interviews in advance was that I found myself continuing to interview people beyond the point of theoretical saturation. However, while the very final interviews did not add to the theoretical analysis, I considered it important to honour my appointments for the sake of maintaining good relations with the participants and the school.

#### **4.6.4.2. Semi-structured interviews**

I conducted several rounds of semi-structured interviews over the course of the fieldwork in order to explore the key themes that had emerged during participant observation and to further my understanding of the research issues. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with discussion facilitated by interpreters (see section 4.11). Before starting the interview I explained the aims of the research and obtained participant consent (see section 4.7). All interviews took place at the Mary Chapman School and were video or audio recorded, depending on language modality.

Although I prepared a set of interview questions for each group of participants, these acted primarily as a guide. As Wengraf (2001) states, semi-structured interview questions should be open and flexible, allowing participants to guide the direction of the interview. Indeed, various unanticipated topics of discussion emerged during the interviews, generating new avenues of enquiry and prompting me to adjust my list of questions. This responsive approach to interviewing ensured that the research dealt with the concerns and experiences of participants, adding texture and depth to my understanding of the research context.

Certainly, this approach to interviewing resulted in a wealth of rich material and added to the complexity of my analysis. However, delving into participants' life experiences required significant sensitivity on my behalf. In particular, a number of parents and carers became emotional when recounting the moment that they found out their child was deaf. In these cases I paused the interview and explained that there was no pressure to continue. While all participants stated a desire to proceed, I shifted to a less emotionally charged topic upon resuming the interviews and used personal judgment in deciding whether to return to potentially difficult questions. Notably, at the end of the sessions many participants referred to the value of the research and expressed satisfaction at having had the opportunity to share their experiences and opinions.

#### **4.6.4.3. Focus groups**

Following on from the first round of semi-structured interviews I conducted six focus groups with a total of nineteen deaf participants. Each session lasted approximately two hours and was video recorded. While focus groups typically involve between five and ten people (e.g. see Cronin, 2008; Krueger and Casey, 2008). I decided to restrict my groups to three participants due to the added complication of using interpreters. In one case a total of 4 people attended, although moderating this group's discussion was noticeably harder.

The main purpose of these discussions was to pursue and develop themes and issues that had emerged during the interviews, thereby allowing me to add depth to my analysis. As

Kitzinger (1994, p. 106) states, by providing an interactive space for discussion participants are able to 'engage with one another, verbally formulate their ideas and draw out the cognitive structures which previously have been unarticulated'. Based on an initial analysis of the interview data, I prepared certain themes and topics for discussion, purposefully keeping the number of questions to a minimum. In this way, I hoped that discussion would develop through group interaction, rather than moderator intervention (see Bryman, 2012).

At the start of each session I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the focus group and the aims of the research more generally. I went over certain 'ground rules', particularly with regard to turn-taking and working with interpreters. I also emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers and that it was acceptable for participants to express different opinions as long as these were discussed respectfully. Indeed, points of disagreement often provided rich data for analysis as participants explored, theorised and justified their heterogeneous opinions.

My primary role as moderator was to ensure that the discussion stayed focused on relevant issues, to ask probing questions when necessary, and to ensure that all participants had the chance to express their opinions and engage in the conversation. I tried to limit my involvement in the discussion as much as possible, although my role was largely determined by the dynamics of each group; while some groups sustained prolonged discussion with minimal input, others required more prompting.

It should be noted that, due to the small size of the deaf community, focus group participants were already well acquainted with each other. While researchers have traditionally sought focus group participants who are unknown to each other, Kitzinger (1994) highlights certain advantages to employing members of a pre-existing group. In particular, she describes the way in which pre-acquainted participants may relate the topics of discussion to their common experiences, offering valuable insight into community life. Additionally, knowledge of each other's lives allows participants to more easily challenge statements made during the discussion. I found that participants' shared

community membership not only made the discussions more vivid, but also provided momentary insight into the collaborative process of knowledge construction amongst group members, notably the way in which ideas and arguments were developed, consensus reached and differences reasoned. Despite these benefits it was important to account for the impact of inter-participant relationships on group dynamics. I therefore established the nature of these relationships at the start of each discussion, asking participants to tell me briefly about themselves and how they knew each other. This also helped participants to relax and grow accustomed to the focus group format.

All interview and focus group participants were compensated for their time, either with gifts or small amounts of money. As Austin (2010) states, in order to be fair without appearing coercive, remuneration must be consistent with cultural norms and local rates of pay. To ensure that I achieved this balance, I consulted a number of Burmese people before deciding on the most appropriate way to reimburse participants.

#### **4.7. Informed consent**

At the start of each interview and focus group session I obtained informed consent from participants. I explained the purpose of the research, the main topics to be covered during the interview and the intended uses of the data. I also reassured people that they should let me know if they were uncomfortable discussing any topic, and emphasised that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could leave the interview at any time. These discussions were conducted either in YSL or in spoken Burmese, depending on the participant, and were video or audio recorded respectively.

While obtaining informed consent typically involves asking participants to sign a written form, I did not consider this method appropriate for my research. As Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al. (2010) and Austin (2010) point out, asking participants to sign their consent may not be suitable in contexts where literacy rates are low or where introducing forms is likely to arouse suspicions. Indeed, the American Anthropological Association (AAA) advises that alternative methods may be necessary in situations:



[W]here people are illiterate or where there is a legacy of human rights abuses creating an atmosphere of fear, or where the act of signing one's name converts a friendly discussion into a hostile circumstance. (2004, section 6)

I did not consider that obtaining written consent would be a meaningful process for many of the deaf participants in the study, who used YSL as their first language and had variable levels of competency in written Burmese. Furthermore, given the country's history of government oppression, I was aware that written consent forms had the potential to inspire trepidation amongst participants and alter the dynamic of the interviews. As Metro (2014) points out, forms have particularly negative associations in Myanmar, given their use by the military government to secure misleading contracts and obtain false confessions.

Once I had explained the purposes and procedures of the research, I encouraged participants to ask me any questions that they might have. This proved to be a useful process, not only aiding the participants' comprehension of the research, but also helping me to develop rapport and trust with the interviewees. A number of participants wanted to know more about my reasons for coming to learn about deaf people and sign language in Yangon, while others enquired as to how long I would be staying in the city, whether I would visit any other deaf communities and when I would start to write up the findings. Other questions did not pertain directly to the research, but indicated a curiosity about deaf life in other countries, with a number of participants asking about sign language, deaf education and sign language interpreter services in the UK.

Obtaining informed consent during participant observation was a more complex process, complicated by the long-term nature of the fieldwork and my inductive approach to research. As Thorne (1980) states, the flexible and open-ended nature of ethnography presents a challenge to ensuring informed consent is maintained throughout the research. To this extent, the AAA (2004, section 6) advocate an 'ongoing and dynamic' approach to informed consent during ethnographic research. Similarly, Austin (2010, p. 39)

describes meaningful consent in long-term research as an ‘on-going conversation’. Thus, in order to ensure that participants remained cognisant of the evolving aims of the research I talked regularly about the aspects of community life in which I was interested. In particular, I made sure that my two main deaf research assistants were kept informed about the current direction of the study. This was vital, not only because they were participants themselves, but also because they voluntarily assumed responsibility for explaining the nature of my fieldwork and research interests to other members of the community.

#### **4.8. Anonymity**

Although participants’ names are not included in this thesis, the decision to anonymise the data was not automatic. While protecting the identity of research participants has become standard procedure, Geest (2003) considers the indiscriminate application of Western ethical standards to all research contexts to be a form of ‘ethical paternalism’. Notably, he found participants from his ethnographic study in Ghana were disappointed to find that their names had been omitted from the written report. Similarly, Kusters (2012, p. 32) notes that for deaf people in Adamorobe ‘the idea of changing their name in a ‘book that is about them’, seemed very odd to them’.

Noting the AAA’s assertion that ‘[e]thnographers should [...] respect participants' wishes if the participants would like to be identified and/or credited’ (2004, section 6)

I decided to ask interviewees whether they would be happy for their names to be included in any research papers. While most people agreed to this, there was no strong indication that they felt it important to be recognised in this way. Moreover, a small minority of participants explicitly requested anonymity. Given the lack of unanimity and the lack of strong opinions demonstrated by the majority of participants regarding the use of their names, I opted, for the sake of consistency, to anonymise all of the data. Nevertheless, it should be noted that maintaining confidentiality can be problematic when working with small, close-knit communities where participants may be identifiable on the basis of information other than their names (see Singleton et al., 2015).

#### **4.9. The school as research site**

I was aware that conducting interviews and focus groups at the school could affect participants' responses, potentially causing them to speak less candidly about issues relating to deaf education. There were, nevertheless, compelling practical reasons for using this venue. The school was a convenient interview site for many of the research participants. Teachers and parents who were interviewed spent the majority of their days at the school, meaning that they were able to take time out to attend the interviews with minimal disruption. Similarly, a significant number of deaf participants either worked in the local area or attended the neighbouring high school. Certainly, the Mary Chapman School was well known and appeared to be fondly regarded in the community. It was common for deaf adults to visit the school and spend time socialising in the handicraft room and chatting with their old teachers. Finally, having unfettered access to a private room, free of charge, was a significant factor in my decision, as I struggled to think of other venues with sufficient space to host participants, interpreters and recording equipment.

While I was confident that participants were not unduly inhibited by being interviewed at the school, I nevertheless took time during my initial introductions to reiterate that I was not affiliated to the school or any other organisation. I also emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions.

#### **4.10. Coding and analysis**

In order to efficiently organise, sort, code and search my data, all transcripts, fieldnotes and other relevant documents were imported into NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software package.

After each interview I transcribed the English translation promptly so that I could begin to code the data. Coding involved two main phases. First 'open coding', in which I assigned each line of the data a short provisional label that corresponded closely to the

text. This was followed by ‘focused coding’, where I applied more conceptually incisive codes to the data.

For Charmaz (2014), initial line-by-line coding serves as a heuristic device, encouraging researchers to interact closely with the text in order to achieve an analysis that is grounded in the data and relevant to the research context. By constantly asking questions such as ‘What is actually happening in the data?’ and ‘What is the main concern being faced by the participants?’ (Glaser, 1998, p. 140) line-by-line coding prevents premature theorising based on pre-conceived ideas thus facilitating a more innovative interpretation of the data (Charmaz, 2014; O’Reilly, 2012). As Charmaz (2014, p. 125) states, this initial phase of open coding ‘encourages you to see otherwise undetected patterns...to take compelling events apart and analyze what constitutes them and how they occurred’. Indeed, I found that scrutinising the data in this way alerted me to themes and issues that I had not noticed on my initial reading of the transcripts.

The meticulous process of line-by-line coding generated a vast number of initial codes. Through constant comparison and regular memo writing I was able to draw links between these codes and start noting points of theoretical interest. Indeed, these memos enabled me to integrate my initial codes and begin focused coding, as I applied this smaller set of more theoretically analytic codes to the data. As I continued to collect and analyze data I further refined the focused codes, often merging them to form more abstract conceptual categories that could be used to interpret and explain significant community processes that were of relevance to the research. In this way, I developed my theoretical framework.

#### **4.11. Working with interpreters**

While I was comfortable conducting the informal conversational interviews in YSL, in-depth interviews and focus groups required a greater degree of language proficiency. For this reason I employed interpreters for this stage of the research, recruiting sign language interpreters through the school and making contact with spoken language interpreters through the English Language department at one of the city’s higher education institutes.

During the very early stages of interviewing I worked with a number of different interpreters. However, I found that their competency varied drastically, with some providing much more detailed interpretations and engaging more in the interview process. Indeed, in three instances my concerns regarding the quality of interpretation led me to discard the resulting interview data. Consequently, I ensured that only the most skilled sign and spoken language interpreters attended the subsequent sessions. Both were highly experienced, having worked in the profession for a number of years<sup>34</sup>. In addition to their language skills I also valued their interest in the research topic, their enthusiasm during interviews and their ability to develop a good rapport with participants. Furthermore, working consistently with them allowed strong working relationships to develop, further benefitting the quality of interpretation as we discussed issues and uncertainties during regular informal debriefs.

With no interpreters able to work directly between YSL and English, interviewing the deaf participants presented a challenging linguistic situation that required the presence of both interpreters; one to work between YSL and Burmese and the other between Burmese and English. To minimise the risk of omissions and errors in the final translation, I explained to the deaf participants that the interpreter might occasionally ask them to pause or sign more slowly. Despite interrupting the flow of discussion, this approach nevertheless facilitated a more accurate interpretation. As an additional measure, I reviewed the videos of the deaf interview sessions on my laptop during the evenings, checking that participants' signed responses appeared consistent with the English translation. Although I did not have the confidence to conduct the interviews in YSL myself, the familiarity of the topics meant that I was comfortable following participants' responses; 'double-checking' the translations in this way allowed me to clarify any points of uncertainty with the interpreters, though this was not often necessary.

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<sup>34</sup> While JICA runs an eighteen month training courses for those wishing to work as sign language interpreters (described in Chapter 2), there are currently no official training courses in Myanmar for those wishing to certify as spoken Burmese-English interpreters, and people must train on the job to develop their skills. The sign language interpreter who worked on this research project had JICA interpreter qualifications and was fluent in YSL with 17 years of teaching experience at the Mary Chapman School. The spoken language interpreter had worked as a translator and interpreter for a number of years and also taught English in one of Yangon's higher education institutions.

Although the accuracy of interpretation was a primary concern throughout the research, it was also necessary to consider the additional ways in which working with interpreters impacted the research. While scholarly discussion has tended to focus on the logistics and technicalities of interpretation, particularly with regards to eliminating errors, Berman and Tyyskä (2011) argue that this technocratic approach fails to acknowledge the inevitable influence that interpreters exert on the research process and the production of knowledge.

The visual modality of YSL added further complexity to the process, drawing attention to the political and ethical implications of interpretation. As Ladd (2003, p. 291) describes, deaf discursive styles tend to be highly descriptive, characterised by creative visual metaphors and ‘theatrical re-enactments’ that are difficult to convey in written English. For Ladd, this loss of affective content not only raises issues regarding the accuracy of translation, but also renders invisible the essential expressiveness of deaf language and cultural life. As Temple and Young (2004) assert, issues pertaining to visibility, representation and power relations are thrown into sharp relief when interpreting between minority and majority languages. Indeed, Skelton and Valentine (2003) suggest that translating from a sign language into a dominant written language risks further marginalising what is an already oppressed and under-represented language. This point is particularly pertinent to the current study which deals explicitly with the symbolic value of sign language, its links to group identity and issues relating to social justice and language (in)equality.

As Martin-Jones et al. (2017) observe, working with interpreters requires the negotiation of diverse identities and relationships, introducing another level of complexity to the research process. Accordingly, Temple and Edwards (2002, p. 6), call for greater reflexivity in cross-language research. In particular, they highlight the way that interpreters inevitably ‘bring their own assumptions and concerns to the interview and the research process’. They advocate interviewing the interpreters employed during research, asking them about their experiences and perspectives in order to make them ‘visible, and

to some extent ‘accountable’, in the same way as researchers may seek to be explicit about their own social and political position’ (p. 6). For this reason I engaged in regular conversations with both of the interpreters, learning about their social positions, values, beliefs and personal opinions on the research issues. Furthermore, on one occasion when an interview participant did not arrive, I took the opportunity to conduct an impromptu and informal interview with the sign language interpreter, in which I asked her more in-depth questions regarding her various roles in the community; in addition to her work as a sign language interpreter, she also worked on the Sign Language Standardisation Project and was further employed as a teacher at the school, where she had started her career in the deaf community in 1998. Given her active involvement in matters pertaining directly to the research I was initially uncertain as to whether she would feel comfortable facilitating potentially critical discussion on these topics. Moreover, I was concerned that deaf participants would not feel able to talk freely on topics such as deaf education and language standardisation in her presence.

To this extent, I found that learning more about her position in the community and her personal perspectives on the research topics helped to assuage these apprehensions. During our conversations, she spoke with enthusiasm about learner-centered education and her commitment to using sign language as the medium of instruction in the classroom; she also described her ambivalence towards the Sign Language Standardisation Project and expressed a deep appreciation of sign language and deaf cultural values. I found her conduct during interviews to be professional, impartial and engaged. Indeed, she referred to the research as a ‘good thing’, and described a personal interest in learning more about deaf people’s perspectives on the research topics.

While frankness was characteristic of the deaf community, I considered that the sign language interpreter’s ability to develop an instant rapport with participants helped to further create an open and accepting interview environment. Deaf participants spoke candidly during the interviews and focus groups, often reiterating statements they had made during participant observation and sometimes expressing their opinions more forcefully as they reflected on the topics in greater depth. To this extent, the interpreter’s

passion for deaf culture and working in the community appeared to inspire trust amongst participants. Indeed, a number of deaf people expressed their satisfaction that this particular interpreter was working on the project, referring not only to her superior signing skills, but also to her ‘good heart’. Her in-depth knowledge of the community also meant that she was able to contribute valuable cultural insight to the research. For example, she would often remark on participant’s responses once the interviews had finished, relating what they had said to her own experiences and understanding of the topic, thus offering a useful additional perspective and helping me to clarify any ambiguity regarding participants’ responses.

The spoken language interpreter fulfilled a similar role during the interviews with teachers and parents. While she was not involved in the deaf community, her understanding of Burmese culture proved to be invaluable, as she worked to ensure that questions were conveyed in a culturally sensitive manner. Our regular debriefs afforded me a clearer understanding of the cultural complexities of the research setting. For example, she explained that teachers were not used to being asked direct questions, and described her decision to ‘soften’ some of my questions, making them more palatable and ensuring the smooth running of the interviews. In these ways, both interpreters assumed multiple roles in the research, working as community researchers and cultural mediators in addition to their role as translators.

#### **4.12. Chapter conclusion**

This chapter has described the research methodology, starting with the philosophical underpinnings of the study. The reasons for selecting an ethnographic methodology were discussed, although it was noted that definitions of ethnography have become increasingly contested. Equating ethnography with participant observation was shown to be problematic, especially for research conducted in communities with diffuse living arrangements. Instead, a more flexible understanding was advocated, based on the purpose of ethnography as opposed to its particular methods. In this way, ethnography was defined as ‘engaged listening’, aimed at developing a deep understanding of social



life. The benefits of combining ethnography with grounded theory were then described, posited as a way for researchers to produce a description of community life that is both detailed and theoretically incisive.

An account of the fieldwork process was then presented, with a description of the data-collection methods and the process of coding and analysis. Some of the challenges that emerged during the research were considered, with attention given to issues of anonymity and confidentiality when conducting research in a small close-knit community.

Furthermore, the problematic nature of consent forms was discussed in relation to Myanmar's history of state oppression. The complexities of conducting cross-linguistic research were also discussed. It was suggested that learning YSL served an important social function, leveling power relations and helping me to establish trust in the community. Moreover, the process of language learning afforded me valuable insight into participants' attitudes regarding the 'correct' way to sign. Finally, a reflexive approach to working with interpreters was advocated. While the accuracy of translation is undeniably important, researchers should also be aware of the social and political position of interpreters, and the impact of this on the research process and the construction of knowledge.

## **Chapter 5: Language in Education Policy at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf**

### **5.1. Introduction**

This chapter examines language in education policy at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf, beginning with an appraisal of the extent to which YSL is used in the classroom. While the majority of teachers recognise the benefits of using YSL as the primary medium of instruction certain practical factors hamper its use. However, the strategies that teachers employ to overcome these obstacles appear to have opened up ‘third spaces’ of negotiation and mutual learning between students and teachers. Crucially, within these spaces, students and teachers re-conceptualise their respective identities, leading to more equal power relations and democratising the classroom as a result.

Attention is then turned to teachers’ pedagogical practices more generally. Unofficial language planning and policy feeds into a wider transformative approach to education in which teachers enter into dialogue with students, and draw on deaf culture, deaf epistemologies and sign language in the classroom. These progressive methods display clear parallels with the principles of linguistic citizenship and the political concept of deliberative democracy (see literature review, section 3.10). Furthermore, they require teachers to subvert the national curriculum and its cultural assumptions, provoking further reconceptualisation of professional identities. As a result, a new cultural politics has emerged in the school that appears to be closely aligned to the opinions of deaf youth regarding the role of language and culture in education.

### **5.2. Sign language in the classroom: opportunities and obstacles**

As described in Chapter 2, section 2.11.2, since the late 1980s, language policy at Mary Chapman School has undergone a broad shift away from oral methods, with emphasis now given to students acquiring both sign language and written Burmese. The majority of

teachers regard this as a positive move, with many favouring sign language as the primary medium of instruction:

It's easier for me to teach them [now] as they only understand sign language. It's better than using speech, it's easier and more effective in the classroom. They understand quicker and communication is just easier with sign language. As a teacher it's really better to use sign language. (T10)

Now that we use sign language the kids can understand better. (T7)

To get results I teach in sign language. (T6)

Despite positive attitudes towards sign language and its use in education, classroom observations at the Mary Chapman School revealed that linguistic practices vary considerably between individual teachers. While some employ bilingual methods, using YSL as the primary medium of instruction with some use of written Burmese, others frequently revert to sign supported speech (as described in Chapter 2, section 2.11.3).

The following fieldnotes are based on observations from a Kindergarten maths class and illustrate one teacher's preference for using sign supported speech in the classroom:

*Around fifteen students sat facing the front of the class, taking it in turns to approach the board and complete one of the subtraction grids their teacher had drawn. As they worked through the grids their teacher stood to the side of the board, speaking loudly in Burmese while simultaneously producing Yangon signs as she gave students instructions and offered guidance. Noticing that one student was struggling to complete a particular sum, the teacher encouraged a second student to help him. As the second student offered a solution to the problem the teacher turned to address the class, exclaiming 'Ah! She's clever!' in Burmese while also producing the YSL sign for clever.*

It is notable that this teacher has a high degree of competence in YSL and had qualified as a sign language interpreter, frequently interpreting between spoken Burmese and YSL during school assemblies and other events. Nevertheless, when communicating with students she would consistently use spoken Burmese alongside her signs. Accounting for this linguistic practice, the teacher explained that she had been trained to work in sign supported speech when she first joined the school in the late 1970s. When the school changed its language policy in the late 1990s to promote the use of YSL she had already been using sign supported speech for twenty years and struggled to adapt to the new policy.

A number of additional obstacles that hinder teachers' ability to use YSL as the primary medium of instruction were described during interviews. For some teachers the diversity of communicative needs and abilities in their classes represented a significant factor in determining linguistic choices:

I adopted some of the [bilingual] methods where I can. But for me I have to teach the children with hearing aids, so I also have to use my speech. I use some of the techniques but not all. (T8)

Some kids can hear a bit, so when I taught the 3rd grade, there were kids who had hearing aids and who could hear with them. So, I'm used to speaking and signing at the same time. (T4)

The need for lexical modernisation represents a further challenge facing sign bilingualism in the school. YSL, like many signed and minority-spoken languages around the world, has certain lacunas in its technical and academic lexicon. As one teacher explained:

There are not too many difficulties for me communicating with the students. Just the academic words, because there aren't signs for all of the academic vocabulary. (T9)

A somewhat paradoxical challenge regards the spontaneous lexical development that occurs naturally amongst students (see Chapter 6, section 6.10 for more on this). For

many teachers the perpetual influx of new vocabulary negatively affects their ability to comprehend students' signing. A general lack of linguistic proficiency may also dictate the extent to which some teachers are able to conduct lessons in YSL. While the school provides a short introductory course in YSL, the content is basic and teachers must then develop their language skills on the job. A number of participants recounted the difficulties that they faced when communicating with students, especially during their early careers:

I'm still learning, the language is quite deep... it's ok for me to communicate with the deaf people, but I'm not fluent yet. (T8)

At first I had some difficulties. It was very hard to communicate with the students, and I wasn't really happy, I mean, I was happy but I was afraid, you know. I didn't have any confidence. Like, will I be able to do this? (T9)

As described in Chapter 2 (section 2.11), trainee teachers at the Mary Chapman School attend a two-week sign language course, with all subsequent learning occurring through interaction with students. A similar situation has been observed in deaf schools in the US, with a considerable number of teachers learning American Sign Language from their students (see Shantie and Hoffmeister, 2000). As Shantie and Hoffmeister (2000) point out, this lack of linguistic competency presents a clear barrier to students' learning and academic success. Deaf participants in this study stressed the paramount importance of teacher fluency in YSL, and their dissatisfaction with Sign Supported Speech:

If in the classroom the teacher is using only sign language and communicates like a deaf person would, then the students can understand very well. But if she teaches in such a way that a hearing person could understand - using both signs and mouthings - then it will be very confusing. I won't get much from it. (D2)

If the teacher just signs each word of a [Burmese] sentence then the deaf kid won't be able to understand because the structure of the spoken language and the sign language is not the same. (D20)

Shantie and Hoffmeister (2000) advocate the employment of deaf teachers within deaf education, reasoning that only native signers can provide students with full access to the curriculum and a strong language model. Indeed, during the fieldwork, a number of deaf people expressed their desire to see more deaf teachers at the Mary Chapman School. One of the two deaf teachers currently employed at the school described the positive effect that being deaf had on his professional practice:

Because both the teacher and the students are deaf it makes teaching very easy. There's a good connection between us. And for the communication, both teacher and students are deaf, so we can communicate very well. *(D20)*

A hearing teacher also reflected on the potential benefits of employing deaf teachers:

It would be better if there was one deaf teacher and one hearing teacher...In the evening when we have worship time, if we need to tell the students off, or tell them something, if a deaf person tells them then they are quiet and pay attention. It's like a very clear language between the two of them. It's more understandable for the kids when the communication is from one deaf person to another. It's like they're better connected. *(T8)*

During fieldwork deaf people often made reference to this strong connection. Not only do deaf adults share the same language, they also have similar life experiences, which may foster empathy and a strong sense of group solidarity. It was common, for example, for personal grievances regarding another deaf person's behaviour to be excused on the basis that 'she/ he is also deaf so I won't push her/him away'. This rapport between deaf people was often cited when discussing the advantages of employing deaf teachers, implying that their perceived value extends beyond linguistic ability. However, as stated in Chapter 2 (section 2.11), only two of the forty-three teachers at Mary Chapman School are deaf signers.

Despite deaf adults' wealth of linguistic and cultural experience, government regulations in Myanmar stipulate that teachers must hold a university degree. As mentioned in Chapter 2, only 11 deaf people in Yangon have ever attended university, thus the vast

majority of deaf adults are barred from entering the school's academic workforce. For Lane (1992), failure to employ deaf adults in schools conveys the message that deaf people have no place in the world. In Yangon the paucity of deaf teachers was widely regarded as indicative of the general social suppression of deaf people. While this provoked some resentment within the deaf community it did not necessarily dampen resolve. Possibly as a reaction to their marginalisation a strong sense of dignity and determination permeated the community. For example, it was common for deaf people to challenge negative stereotypes by asserting their strength, independence and good intellect. It was also common for people to encourage each other to pursue their ambitions with mantras such as "keep trying!", "try hard!" and "deaf people are strong!".

Despite the challenges they had experienced within the education system, two deaf youths in their final year of schooling described their shared ambition to attend university and become teachers themselves, citing their ability to develop a close connection with students and deliver lessons in sign language:

D2: I'd like to be a teacher for the deaf

D7: Me too, I'm also hoping to teach

Interviewer: What makes you want to be a teacher?

D7: I just want to teach everything and develop a really good connection with the students

D2: Yeah, and I'd like to give students a really deep understanding by using sign language

*(Focus group discussion)*

So far this chapter has described teachers' generally positive attitudes towards using YSL in the classroom. It has also examined some of the factors that impede the consistent use of YSL as the medium of instruction, including the lack of deaf teachers. For authors such as Lane (1992), education that fails to employ teachers from the same linguistic and

cultural background as students is destined to reproduce mainstream societal values, keeping minority students marginalised. Working from this basis, Kaomea (2005) states that it is doubtful that a transformative model of indigenous education can truly be achieved until indigenous people are represented in the class as teachers<sup>35</sup>.

While it is likely that employing deaf teachers would contribute to a more democratic form of education, analysis of fieldnotes and interviews suggests that the gradual, fraught process of introducing YSL has in fact opened up spaces of negotiation and mutual learning between deaf students and hearing teachers. The next section considers this process in greater detail, examining how teachers' strategies for overcoming the unique challenges of their work have resulted in a new cultural politics in the school, feeding into a wider, transformative and empowering classroom culture with strong parallels to Freire's (1996) concept of critical pedagogy (see Literature Review, section 3.8.3).

### **5.3. Recognising students as cultural-linguistic experts**

As described in section 5.2, teachers' initial lack of competence in YSL has presented a significant barrier to the effective delivery of lessons. Many teachers recalled the difficulty of learning a new language when reflecting on their early careers. Some described feeling embarrassed by their lack of language skills while others indicated that they had doubted their ability to work in the profession. One teacher recounted how she had wanted to leave the job on a number of occasions:

Interviewer: What sort of things made you want to quit?

T6: Whenever the students had difficulties [understanding] I would feel bad about it, as though I am useless to them, as though I can't be of any benefit to them. I would feel responsible if they didn't get the lessons. That's why I wanted to quit...I get to call myself a teacher, to say that I am working here, but if they don't get the lessons then I feel irresponsible being in my job.

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<sup>35</sup> While 40% of students at the Mary Chapman School represent ethnic minorities, deaf participants did not appear to regard ethnicity as being relevant to their educational experiences, with discussion focusing exclusively on issues relating to their deaf identity and use of YSL.



In order to develop their linguistic competency and overcome these difficulties, teachers' only recourse is to learn the language from their students. Clearly, this situation is far from ideal, compromising students' access to the taught curriculum. Nevertheless, teachers' willingness to learn from their students has engendered a process of mutual learning in the school, prompting a re-conceptualisation of their professional identity as a consequence:

It's kind of like they're educating us. It's not just us teaching them, we get a lot of from them as well. (T9)

I have to be like a student myself. Sometimes I'm a teacher, but sometimes I become a student. (T11)

Rather than begrudging this situation, teachers generally embraced it, referring to the sense of fulfillment that this linguistic exchange has brought them.

I'm very happy about it. I get new signs from them and I get knowledge from them. And when they want [to understand Burmese] words I can give that to them, so it makes me happy. (T9)

Notably, by assuming the role of 'sometime students' teachers negotiate the terms of their own professional identity. Moreover, they do so relative to their students, who in turn are positioned as cultural-linguistic experts and guardians of the language. As one teacher states:

I have to learn from them, the deaf children, because it's their language. It's OK with me. (T3)

By reappraising their professional roles in this way, teachers relinquish some of the authority traditionally associated with their profession, subjecting the established relationship between student and teacher to scrutiny and dismantling school hierarchies in the process.

#### **5.4. Lexical modernisation: ideological exchange and democracy in the classroom**

Lexical modernisation, as another pre-requisite for teaching effectively in YSL, also feeds into this process of democratisation. In addition to its primary objective, the process of developing new signs appears to serve a significant social function, generating further opportunities for collective learning and negotiation between deaf people and teachers. While the pressure to deliver lessons at a timely pace leads many teachers to create their own signs spontaneously, at times teachers also defer to students regarding matters of lexical development, in recognition of their linguistic prowess and ownership of the language. In the following interview extract a teacher recalls an instance during a geology class where some students expressed an interest in a particular mineral for which there was no sign. In response, the teacher took time from delivering the official curriculum to consult a number of students on the matter:

In one lesson we had two kinds of minerals, but we didn't have a sign for them. So we showed one of the minerals to the deaf people. Well, the word [for the mineral] in Burmese ends in the word 'green', but actually it's not really green, it's a white kind of silvery colour with stripes and it comes from underground. So we showed it to the deaf people and they looked at it, and we asked them how they would sign it. We showed it to grade 4 students, and then some students who are older and some students who have joined the mainstream school, and all of the three groups produced the same sign. Exactly the same! It's amazing that they can do that. (T11)

Rather than strictly adhering to the curriculum, the teacher decided to pursue the interest of her students, prioritising and thus legitimising their curiosity. During such moments students are accorded an active and leading role in their own education. Moreover, by tasking students with the creation of a new sign the balance of power in the classroom shifts in recognition of their linguistic creativity and expertise. Through consultation with students, the activity becomes part of a wider and more inclusive democratic process.

In addition to this type of ad-hoc development, all teachers and a roughly equal number of deaf alumni attend an annual two-week workshop organised by the school<sup>36</sup>. This event, with its prime objective of developing signs for teaching, in fact comprises a complex social encounter; an ideological meeting place characterised by contestation and debate. Notably, as Gutierrez et al. (1995) point out, contestation in these instances is redefined as a positive force, bridging social diversity and leading ultimately to social learning.

Creating signs that satisfy both parties is a highly politicised and time-consuming process, requiring lengthy negotiations. As one teacher described, discussion between teachers and deaf people, and sometimes amongst deaf people themselves, is typified by a frank exchange of opinions regarding the appropriateness of prospective signs:

We only have a little time and everyone is like, ‘we like this, we like that’ ‘you like this, I like that’. Even amongst the deaf students one may say ‘I like it’ and the other may not. But then even if they all like it the teacher may not. In the end we always resolve it and everything is ok, but there are a few difficulties in the process. (T3)

Accounting for such disagreements, a number of teachers referred to a lack of understanding amongst deaf people regarding the semantic intricacies of Burmese words, emphasising the need to provide clear definitions when developing equivalent signs:

Sometimes it’s like they don’t know the true meaning [of the word] because they are deaf, so we have to give explanations and tell them why it [the sign] should be like this, and then we have to give them proof. (T3)

With Burmese as a second language, many deaf people acknowledged the limits of their vocabulary and accepted the need for teachers to be involved in the process of sign development. However, even after providing definitions, teachers reported that it was often the case that a sign would still not be accepted. Indeed, disagreements between

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<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately I was unable to attend this event as it was held during the two months that I returned to the UK (as described in the Methodology chapter).

teachers and deaf alumni regarding the appropriateness of signs may also stem from conflicting ideologies of linguistic authenticity. To this extent it was notable that teachers demonstrated a tendency to work from ‘Burmese-centric’ criteria when approaching the task of lexical development:

So there will be one word that we have written down, and then we talk about the word’s meaning, where it is used and what the root word is. Based on that we make a new sign. *(T11)*

In addition to taking the linguistic structure of Burmese as their starting point, teachers also emphasised the importance of being able to represent Burmese conceptual categories in YSL. A number of teachers referred to what they considered to be a problematic lack of one-to-one correspondence between Burmese words and YSL signs, stressing the need to develop exact semantic equivalents:

For example the word ‘pass away’ - in Burmese we have many different words. It’s different if a monk passes away, or a Christian, or a Buddhist or a Muslim. So we have different words, even though it is the same thing. It depends on the context. But for them, they only have one sign. So we have to tell them about the words we use for the different occasions and we have to explain a lot about their meanings [in order to develop corresponding signs]. *(T11)*

This concern is understandable to the extent that teachers are required to follow the Myanmar National Curriculum and distinguish between the concepts included within it. Yet this approach unwittingly prioritises Burmese cultural concepts and linguistic structure with little regard for deaf cultural perspectives or the unique linguistic resources of YSL.

It is likely that deaf people assess the legitimacy of new signs according to a distinct set of criteria. Crucially, as a product of deaf community interaction, YSL is seen as highly symbolic of the shared experiences of the group and of deaf people’s linguistic creativity. In this way, members of the deaf community posit a strong link between YSL, deaf culture and identity, with authenticity judged according to the perceived cultural

relevance of signs (see Chapter 6 for a detailed account of community ideologies on authentic language). To this extent, signs developed by hearing people on the basis of Burmese language and the conceptual distinctions contained within it risk corrupting the cultural integrity of YSL.

This ideological incongruence highlights the limitations of a purely technical approach to lexical development. As a process imbued with ideology and politics, the development of YSL has significant potential for conflict and tension. The Literature Review (section 3.6.2) described how such tensions could lead to community factions. Yet, in certain circumstances contestation and dispute may prise open a discursive space in which competing opinions can be voiced and debated, prompting inter-cultural exchange and social learning. While the incompatibility of ideological frameworks may result in disagreement regarding new signs, this conflict in fact appears to stimulate an appreciation amongst teachers regarding deaf ownership of YSL. This is illustrated by a widespread recognition that deaf people must be involved in the workshops to ensure community acceptance of neologisms. As one teacher explained:

We must ask deaf people along. If only hearing people create signs then the deaf people don't really like it, they won't really accept it. So we have to have deaf people join us to create the new words, otherwise they won't accept them. *(T1)*

Similarly, teachers' emphasis on the importance of negotiation and discussion is strongly linked to a recognition that ultimate approval of signs must come from deaf people. As such, most expressed a willingness to cede the final decision to deaf people.

We just have to negotiate. There are a lot of negotiations that go on...It's very important that deaf people accept the new sign. Only then can we use it. It depends on them. It's their language...If they don't accept it, if they don't like it, then they won't use it. Even if we say that 'this is the final sign'. If they don't like it they won't use it. *(T11)*

There are lots of discussions that we have between ourselves. That's how we agree [on a sign]. But there are some cases, like when they really like one

particular sign, then we have to just agree with them and let it go, be like ‘OK we’ll use this. (T3)

The above analysis suggests that the process of developing YSL vocabulary gives rise to third spaces of collaboration and contestation. In these spaces not only are signs negotiated, but so too are ideologies, identities, and power relations. While these transactions are momentary, occurring within a much larger socio-historical framework in which deaf people have been persistently disenfranchised, for Bhabha (2004) the accretion of small displacements in the social fabric holds potential for more enduring social transformation. As Heller and Martin-Jones (2001) describe, gaps and interstices in the social order offer opportunities to contest, critique and ultimately change established conventions. At the Mary Chapman School, the coalescence of these momentary third spaces of negotiation seem to support the emergence of linguistic citizenship and a deliberative form of democracy, whereby deaf people’s linguistic identities and ideologies are introduced into the social arena and legitimised as topics worthy of debate. As described in the Literature Review (section 3.10), public reasoning, negotiation and debate form the core principles of linguistic citizenship and are regarded as central to a meaningful and transformative form of equality.

Significantly, negotiations between teachers and deaf alumni appear to feed into a growing recognition within the school community that deaf people are linguistic experts, and guardians of the language. Thus, lexical development as an ideologically laden and fraught social process transcends its primary objective of creating signs, further contributing to the democratisation of the school.

### **5.5. Linguistic citizenship in the classroom: locating LEP within a broader transformative pedagogy**

Not only do teachers consult students regarding linguistic issues but many also defer to them in matters concerning education more generally, in order to optimise the efficacy of their teaching. This creates further opportunities for negotiation and mutual learning, prompting reflection amongst some teachers regarding the nature of their professional

identities and the distribution of power in the classroom. The following section considers how language policy at the school comprises one integral component of a much broader pedagogical shift at the school, in which deaf epistemological viewpoints and cultural behaviours also assume a central position.

Contemplating best practice in the classroom, a number of teachers described the importance of entering into dialogue with students, not only with regard to strictly linguistic issues (as described in the preceding section) but also in relation to their learning styles and preferences more generally. It is notable that, in the first instance, such reflections often appear to have been triggered by difficulties associated with communicating in YSL. For example, one teacher described how a lack of understanding amongst students during her classes prompted her to consider the possible reasons for this, including her own communicative style:

When they don't understand [the lesson] it's kind of frustrating. But I have to think about their point of view as well, you know, I can't just think of it from my own perspective. I have to think, you know, is it because of the way that I'm explaining it, am I not clear enough? Or, is it because the kids have different levels, or different ways of learning? Sometimes they can absorb the lessons but it also depends on their IQ level. I have to think of things from their point of view too. (T2)

In a similar way, another teacher reflected on how the challenges of teaching in sign language had led her to consider her teaching methods more generally. This had prompted her to enter into discussion with students and, ultimately, reflect on the nature of her professional identity as a teacher:

I have to think like them and negotiate with them and then I have to ask them like 'will you understand better if I teach it like this or will it be difficult for you?' So they can tell me the best way for them. So I cannot just do it like, I am the teacher and you have to listen to what I teach! I have to negotiate with them. (T6)

By engaging with students in this way the teacher demonstrates her acceptance of alternative ways of learning, and shows a willingness to acquiesce to the preferences of

her students. To this extent, students are able to take an active role in shaping their education and become subjects in their own learning. Moreover, the collaborative nature of negotiation dissolves the rigid bifurcation between teacher and student, working to equalise power relations in the classroom.

The importance of democratising the student-teacher relationship is also emphasised in the following interview extract. In common with the above example, this teacher's reflections stem primarily from the challenges of communicating in YSL. In this instance a misunderstanding had occurred between her and her students. Specifically, an instruction that she had given to meet up immediately after an exam had in fact only been understood by the Christian students, on the basis of their shared cultural knowledge regarding the tradition of gathering to give thanks after exams. This apparent lack of compliance, she explained, had initially frustrated her, until one student explained the need for her to alter her signing style in order to avoid similar cross-cultural misunderstandings in the future:

One student said to me 'teacher, what you said wasn't complete, your sentence was not properly finished. You have to explain in detail and give complete sentences. But your sentence wasn't complete. For us, we are Christians so we understood what you meant. But for the others, they don't really understand because they are from a different religion. So next time please explain everything in a complete sentence. Don't say it in a shortened way' (T11)

The teacher went on to emphasise the importance of learning from her mistake, and crucially relinquishing some of the power traditionally associated with being a teacher:

When the students told me that, I knew that I had to change. When I tell them something I have to say it in complete sentences so that they will understand. I cannot just be like a teacher, take all of the power like that. I can't just say that I'm always right because I'm the teacher. (T11)

Central to all of these accounts is the negotiation of power; a democratising of relations in the classroom whereby teachers reflect on and modify their teaching practices in response to student feedback, re-conceptualising the nature of their professional identity in the



process. The significance of these reports is particularly striking given the strict hierarchy that endures between students and teachers within mainstream education in Myanmar (see section 2.4.5). Against this wider cultural backdrop, the learner-centered, egalitarian practices described by these teachers represents a particularly novel approach.

Writing about the challenges of implementing progressive, learner-centered methods in an international context, a number of scholars note that a fear of being ‘de-skilled’ has, in many cases, led teachers to reject the approach (e.g. see Schweisfurth, 2011; Tabulawa, 2003). Moreover, as Schweisfurth (2011) points out, the shift in student-teacher power relations required by progressive forms of pedagogy may be hard for teachers to accept, particular in cultures where rigid power differentials inform social organisation.

Reporting on the limited success of learner-centered teacher training trials in Myanmar, Clifford and Khaing Phyu Htut (2015) refer to the widely held belief amongst teachers that this approach would encourage rudeness amongst students and erode their respect for teachers. At the Mary Chapman School, however, there was little indication that teachers linked their egalitarian approach to diminishing respect, or considered it to detract from their professional credentials. In fact, the processes of mutual learning and negotiation were often framed in terms of professional growth. As one teacher described, learning from deaf people is a mark of professional competence, central to overcoming the challenges of the classroom:

Some of the teachers have less experience and so they have more difficulties, more challenges in the classroom. It really just depends on the work experience. Well, not only the work experience, but also learning from the deaf people. Getting knowledge from them, that is also important. *(T1)*

While many described the challenges of learning YSL (see section 5.2), acquiring a new language was considered by many teachers to accord them with a unique professional identity, distinguishing them positively from teachers in other schools:

I learned a new language, so it was more of an achievement than others [teachers in hearing schools], because I learned another language that not many people know. *(T8)*

I feel like I've learned more, like other teachers, if they're teaching at the mainstream school, they're just teaching. But for me, I feel like I've learned another language while I've been teaching them. So it's quite rewarding for me in that way. (T4)

I feel like I get a new language ... for me, as a teacher, I can say I speak 4 languages. I can speak English, Burmese, my own language - Kachin - and sign language. So I know 4 languages. (T6)

Not only is the acquisition of YSL valued as a unique skill, but a number of teachers also mentioned the important role it plays in gaining students' respect. One teacher described the encouragement that she had gained by learning from her students and earning their respect:

Sometimes I get discouraged a little bit. I feel down because of it [not understanding the students' signing]. But sometimes when they're using the new signs that I don't understand then I ask them 'what are you signing, can you tell me?' and then they explain it to me. So after they've explained it to me I feel like I get a new word. So when I get the sign then they're like 'Oh! this teacher can sign!', so then they think highly of me. (T5)

In stark contrast to the automatic deference paid to teachers in traditional Burmese culture, respect in this context is something that must be earned. Indeed, it is notable that the criteria with which teachers at the Mary Chapman School judge professional competence appear to have developed 'emically' within the school and in dialogue with deaf people. It could be argued that by positioning language acquisition, mutual learning and self-reflection as valuable resources for professional growth, teachers are able to forge a positive professional identity out of what is, in many ways, a challenging situation. Significantly, this philosophy, and the Learner-Centered methods that accompany it grant teachers with the room to make mistakes and learn from the challenges of their work without it reflecting poorly on their overall professional identity.

## 5.6. The restrictive impact of the national curriculum

Despite these teachers' commitment to a democratic, transformative, form of pedagogy, their obligation to follow the National Curriculum imposes significant restrictions on the extent to which they are able to adapt their teaching methods. As Han Tin (2008) states, Myanmar's National Curriculum and its standardised examination system continue to prioritise rote learning and memorisation of facts (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.5). During the interviews a number of teachers expressed their frustration with this situation, highlighting the inadequacies of the curriculum and its lack of relevance to deaf students:

I think it would be better if the deaf students had their own education, their own course just for the deaf people. It would be better for the children. At the moment we are just teaching for them to pass the test, not for them to really understand what we are teaching. We have to follow the mainstream school's teaching methods just for them to get good grades. Not for them to really be educated. (T9)

It would be good if there were a curriculum and teaching all the way up to grade 10 just for the deaf students. (T8)

A number of teachers also referred to the pressure to progress through the syllabus at a rate determined by the government, and cited insufficient time as a significant challenge in their work:

Before [using the National Curriculum] we could focus on teaching one thing for a week, for example, but we can't do that anymore. There is no time for that. So although there are many students who don't understand, or don't really get the lessons, we need to push them to pass each year and move up a grade. (T3)

It should be noted that it was common for hearing people to level similar complaints at the national education system, lamenting the futility of rote learning and the narrow focus of examinations. Moreover, Lall (2016) describes state school teachers' concerns regarding the insufficient time given to cover the contents of the curriculum. These issues, however, may be magnified in the context of deaf education where certain unique

circumstances add to the responsibilities of teachers. For example, as Roald (2002) points out, the use of a visual language may require additional class time, given that deaf students cannot take written notes and attend to the teacher simultaneously. Furthermore, Gregory (2005) highlights that teachers may also need to compensate for the fact that deaf students typically begin school with negligible linguistic skills and consequently have very limited world knowledge. Factors specific to the Mary Chapman School, such as the challenges associated with teaching in sign language (described in section 5.2) introduce additional pressures into the classroom. The National Curriculum leaves teachers with little time or flexibility to meet these additional demands. As McNeil (2002) asserts, standardised curricula and testing methods diminish teachers' agency and inhibit students' participatory learning. Notably, the model of education upon which the National Curriculum is based stands in direct opposition to the educational philosophy favoured by growing numbers of teachers at the Mary Chapman School. In particular, the focus on rote learning and standardised testing assumes a rigidly hierarchical relationship between students and teachers, incompatible with the growing commitment to a learner-centered, egalitarian form of education at the school.

### **5.7. Subverting cultural norms in the curriculum**

Despite the stifling effect of the National Curriculum, fieldnotes and interview data suggest that teachers find opportunities to subvert the curriculum and the cultural assumptions contained within it. For example, one teacher described setting her own class exams in addition to official test papers, encouraging students to develop alternative ways of learning and knowing:

When I write my exam questions for the students I make sure that it is not the sort of exam where they have to just use rote memory. I want to test other aspects of their intelligence - their creativity. (*Informal conversation*)

This teacher is fluent in YSL and works as an interpreter alongside her teaching duties. During informal conversation she emphasised the importance of teaching in YSL, as well as integrating interactive teaching methods and critical thinking into her classes. During

our discussion she had talked enthusiastically about an up-coming lesson in which students would present their personal experiences of rural life to the class. The following fieldnotes are based on observations of this class:

*On the 4<sup>th</sup> floor of the school, in a light airy room adorned with brightly coloured posters and diagrams of the sign language alphabet, two students prepare to give their presentation. Moving onto the podium at the front of the class they taped a large sheet of paper with three hand drawn diagrams of farming tools onto the board. After a moment, one of the boys stepped forward, 'Hey everyone! OK, who hasn't arrived yet? Has Brother R<sup>37</sup> come yet?' he signed energetically, engaging with his fellow classmates. The students in the audience responded enthusiastically, waving in applause and collectively answering his questions. Before the first student started to present his diagrams to the class the teacher told him to first let the other students try to guess what the drawings were of. Accompanied by much laughter a number of students offered suggestions, to which the presenting student responded by signing 'almost!', 'not quite!'. Once the guessing came to an end the student proceeded to describe in detail what each of the three tools were used for in his village. Throughout the presentation the other students and the teacher often repeated signs that he had used, occasionally asking for clarification regarding their meaning, or for more information on the topic. Towards the end of the presentation the teacher asked the student to repeat one of the signs he had used. 'Oh, like this?' she checked, signing it back to him and nodding in understanding once he had explained. (Fieldnotes from a 7<sup>th</sup> grade 'Myanmar' class)*

Basing the lesson on students' personal experiences in this way validates the unique knowledge that they bring to the class, creating a space in which they assume the role of 'expert'. What was also notable was the high level of group interaction that occurred

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<sup>37</sup> Many students base their sign name on the first letter of their spoken language name, using the manual alphabet. However, this practice is said to be falling out of favour, with a move to more visually motivated names that refer to a prominent characteristic of the person (see Mindess (1990) for an account of sign names in deaf communities).

independent of the teacher's mediation. While the teacher initially encouraged students to guess what the diagrams represented, interactions thereafter were regulated entirely by the students. In this way the lesson was not only based on the knowledge and experiences of the students but also centred on their interactional style. This style was notable for being collaborative, inquisitive and highly engaged, with the presentations frequently punctuated by questions from other students as well as the teacher. To this effect the teacher assumed a similar role to the students, sitting amongst them and watching the presentations. Together they legitimated the student's knowledge and his linguistic prowess with a stream of positive feedback, repeating signs in demonstration of their understanding and making enquiries regarding ones they had not encountered before.

The lesson described above was somewhat exceptional, being dedicated to student presentations. Yet it was common to observe behaviour that would be considered counter to cultural norms and the role traditionally prescribed to students in Myanmar. Students appeared to have a high degree of freedom in many of their classes, where they would engage in conversation, move around, draw diagrams on the blackboard and go through notes with each other. As one participant put it:

Here [at the Mary Chapman School] the kids are allowed to communicate freely. I don't have to be afraid of the teachers here ... Also, the way the teachers handle the rules is different in this school. The teachers here give principles to the children but they also give the children freedom and let them be relaxed. (D23)

For Gutierrez et al. (1995) these counter-hegemonic classroom activities contribute to the creation of 'new learning spaces'; third spaces in which the alternative cultural, linguistic and cognitive resources of students are valued, thus expanding opportunities for meaning-making and learning.

These observations demonstrate some of the ways in which the National Curriculum and its cultural tenets are subverted in the classroom. The egalitarian manner in which teachers work to overcome linguistic challenges, and the unofficial language policy which they enact on a daily basis, may be seen to comprise part of a wider pedagogical

and cultural shift at the school. By valuing sign language and deaf epistemological viewpoints these linguistic and pedagogical practices dismantle the traditional hierarchical relationship between student and teacher and democratise the classroom.

### **5.8. Deaf youth perspectives on culture and language in education**

The significance of teachers incorporating culture in addition to language into their classroom practices was emphasised by a number of young deaf people who had recently graduated from the school. Discussion during focus group sessions with deaf youth suggested that respect for deaf people and their culture and language was considered paramount for effective teaching. While fluency in YSL was universally regarded as an essential pre-requisite for teaching, linguistic proficiency on its own was considered insufficient by some. Participants in one focus group referred to the importance of teachers behaving in a culturally congruent manner with their students:

They should be very passionate and interested in the deaf students. A hearing teacher, even if they can sign very well, if they can't blend in well with the students, if they still seem like a hearing person, then it's not very helpful... A hearing teacher should still fit in well with the culture of the deaf people [all three participants nod in agreement] (*D7*)

Articulating a similar view, a participant in another focus group referred to the importance of hearing people learning about deaf culture alongside the language:

It would be good if they [hearing people] could really make a connection with deaf people, not just learn some signs but really learn about deaf ways. That would be good. (*D3*)

For these participants, disembodiment of the language from its socio-cultural life is problematic, pointing to the strong link that deaf people posit between language and culture (described in detail in Chapter 6). Calls for teachers to take a more holistic approach, adopting linguistic *and* cultural practices, may also relate to the community's desire for respect and, ultimately, equality. Indeed, deaf people often referred to the

importance of being respected. The following focus group extract further demonstrates that, for these deaf people, a teacher is judged not only on the basis of their commitment to learning YSL, but also according to their willingness to learn the language from deaf people, and the respect that they show for the deaf community:

D7: Sometimes students might tell teachers what mistakes they're making [with the language] and so then they need to keep practicing. If the teacher doesn't bother changing when they make a mistake, then what's the use? They should be dedicated to picking up the language, absorbing it, making sure they're doing everything right including facial expressions and body movements, really trying to improve.

Interviewer: Is it just the sign language that's important, or are there other things as well?

D2: Not only signing, they must have respect for deaf people.

For these alumni, language policy and YSL use in the school cannot be abstracted from its social, political and cultural milieu; education that is truly meaningful is based on respect, contingent on teachers incorporating both language and culture into the classroom. As Johnson (2008) points out with reference to the Maori bicultural movement, respect is fundamental to obtaining equality. As he describes, respect requires that the dominant group forgo their perceived cultural superiority, recognising the value and equality of indigenous epistemologies. Essentially, when teachers at the Mary Chapman School consult students on educational and linguistic matters and draw on deaf ways of being in the classroom they demonstrate respect, levelling unequal power relations in the process.

## **5.9. Chapter discussion**

This chapter has illustrated the pivotal role that teachers play as de facto language planners at the school, enacting unofficial LEP on a daily basis through their language practices and attitudes; the value that they place in students' linguistic knowledge; and the way in which they negotiate language barriers. Attention was given to some of the



technical factors that limit the use of YSL in the classroom, offering insight into the practical challenges surrounding bilingual education at the school. While these obstacles restrict students' access to the taught curriculum, the strategies that teachers employ in order to overcome such challenges were shown to give rise to innovative third spaces of cultural and ideological negotiation in which teachers and students redefine their respective identities, reflecting critically on the distribution of power at the school and dismantling hierarchies in the process. Crucially, attempts to overcome technical barriers do not abstract YSL from its sociocultural context, but feed into a wider socio-political discourse.

It was suggested that the challenges associated with using YSL in the classroom prompt some teachers to reflect on their pedagogical practice more generally. It was noted that students' learning preferences, epistemologies and interactional styles were incorporated into many classes, comprising a form of counter-hegemonic activity in which alternative cultural scripts enter into the classroom and gain legitimacy. As Gutierrez et al. (1995, p. 447) assert, in these third spaces, the classroom becomes a site of transformation 'where no cultural discourse is secondary'. Indeed, the pedagogical approaches and LEP enacted at the school are analogous to Fraser's definition of transformative approaches to social equality, 'restructuring the underlying generative framework' (see Literature Review, section 3.9.2); through dialogue and negotiation, new ways of being are introduced to the school that challenge dominant ideologies and alter the underlying social order. To this extent, while fully bilingual methods have not yet been implemented across the school, teachers' preference for dialogue and negotiation, and their tendency to draw on community ideologies and language practices, suggests that students enjoy a form of linguistic and cultural citizenship in the classroom (see Literature Review section 3.10).

It should be noted that the preceding analysis has focused entirely on instances in which dominant power relations and hegemonic ideologies are subverted to create empowering contexts. There is still a clear need, however, for more YSL to be used in the class, as emphasised by deaf youth. It should also be noted that, alongside the progressive teaching methods described here, more traditional approaches are also used depending on the

individual teacher and the demands of the lesson. Moreover, the solutions and strategies that teachers employ to overcome the unique challenges of working in the school do not necessarily result in best pedagogical practice. However, as Mohanty (2009) describes when reflecting on the pedagogical challenges of linguistic minority education in Orissa State India, while teaching methods may be imperfect, a creative space is nevertheless engendered when teachers engage with cultural and linguistic diversity in the classroom and employ collaborative learning methods. As Bartolomé (1994) argues, it is the democratic process of negotiation as much as the resultant teaching practices that alter power relations in the school and engender an empowering learning environment (see Literature Review, section 3.8). To this extent it is suggested that the third spaces of negotiation described in this chapter give rise to a democratic and innovative learning space in which new identities and an alternative cultural conscience enter into the political discourse of the school. Within this dialogic space students can theorise and act upon the world they inhabit as part of a gradual and challenging process of transformation and empowerment (see also Leistyna, 2009).

Crucially, the above findings challenge the view that schools are destined to reproduce dominant marginalising social structures and have no capacity for promoting social justice for linguistic minorities (as described in the Literature Review). The findings also contest the opposing view that mother-tongue education, when implemented effectively, will necessarily promote equality for minority groups. As described in the Literature Review (section 3.8) this perspective has led to a technocratic approach to LEP that is focused heavily on developing learning materials and training courses. In fact, both views abstract language issues from their social context and overlook the importance of interactions between teachers and students in the classroom. The preceding analysis of LEP at the Mary Chapman School points to the primacy of human relations for promoting equality in the classroom and dismantling asymmetric power relations. As Heller and Martin-Jones (2001, p.6) note in their discussion on language use in educational settings, social order is ‘interactionally constructed’ in the classroom. To this extent, there is always the potential for challenging the status quo and creating new social positions and relations of power.

## **Chapter 6: Unofficial Community Language Planning and Policy**

### **6.1. Introduction**

Following the previous chapter's examination of language in education policy at the Mary Chapman School, this chapter presents a detailed analysis of language ideologies and unofficial LPP within the deaf community. Supporting May's (2015) assertion that LPP is not developed in a social or historical vacuum, the chapter draws attention to the complex and dynamic ways in which language ideologies, identities, wider social experiences and beliefs regarding the meaning of equality and social justice coalesce to form an unwritten, yet potent, community policy regarding which linguistic forms and practices are acceptable for use.

In order to contextualise the following analysis and develop a deeper appreciation of the social significance that is attributed to YSL, the first section of this chapter is dedicated to deaf people's personal life histories: their experiences of social participation and language use across a range of institutions including the family home, mainstream hearing schools, the Mary Chapman School and wider society. Also included in this section are the experiences of parents of deaf children, which offer further insight into the challenges facing young deaf people in Myanmar.

Attention is then given to various language ideologies that operate in the community, focusing specifically on the way in which participants respond to and rationalise three different types of language change: foreign borrowings, in-community lexical development and the decline of Burmese mouthings. The language ideologies described not only offer insight into the cognitive processes of the community, but are also shown to serve a clear political function, mobilised by participants as they work to influence language use and safeguard the integrity and vitality of the language and community. While there was much ideological consensus within the Yangon deaf community,

Kroskrity and Field (2009, p. 7) point out that ideologies are ‘typically complex, heterogeneous, contradictory and even contentious’. This chapter also illustrates instances of ideological idiosyncrasy within the community, drawing particular attention to an ideological cleavage regarding the use of Burmese mouthings. These divergent perspectives are found to stem from distinct views on the nature of social justice and citizenship, which are in turn closely linked to the unique life experiences of each group, thus highlighting the importance of a comprehensive and multifaceted approach to LPP analysis.

Finally, the chapter considers the lack of language rights discourse in the deaf community and examines specific factors that may inhibit a rights course from developing in the community. It is then posited that, in lieu of language rights, young deaf people in Yangon envision an alternative path to equality based on their experiences of linguistic and cultural citizenship at the Mary Chapman School.

## **6.2. Life histories: growing up deaf**

This first section is dedicated to the life histories of young deaf people, with particular attention given to their experiences of social participation before and after attending the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf and learning YSL. Marginalisation and resistance feature prominently in these narratives, as participants reflected on the process of entering into the deaf community and the various meanings that deafness had held for them at different points in their lives. The analysis presented below focuses on the experiences of deaf people aged 18 – 35, who attended the school after the shift to using sign language in the classroom. The older generation’s educational experiences are considered in section 6.13.1. While deaf people’s accounts are the focus of this section, the views and experiences of parents of deaf children are also included, contributing an additional layer of understanding to this analysis of deaf life in Myanmar.

### **6.2.1. Deaf people's experiences before attending the Mary Chapman School**

Deaf people's accounts of life before attending the school were characterised by extreme social isolation and low self-esteem. Unsurprisingly, the inability to communicate was central to these experiences:

I wanted to communicate and I tried but no one understood, not my mum, not my granddad. So I just kept myself to myself and went on like that, it didn't feel good. (D20)

[Before] I couldn't understand anything. When I saw [hearing people] talking to each other, I felt scared, I lacked confidence in myself and I felt shy as well. I lacked confidence and felt scared, so I was always alone. (D23)

Mothers of deaf students also reflected on their children's early years, describing strained communications, which were typically reliant on pointing, gesture and physical interaction. Some recalled how the frustration of not being able to communicate had led their child to respond with self-harm:

Before we came to this school I didn't understand what she was saying, if she was angry, or when she was annoyed, she would hit herself because we couldn't understand what she was saying. (P3)

Extreme social isolation is a common experience for deaf children born into hearing families where no common language is shared (see, for example, Mccaskill and O'Brien, 2016). In addition to linguistic deprivation, the social stigma associated with deafness also impacted negatively on deaf people's social participation. As Van Brakel (2006) asserts, health related stigma is a global phenomena affecting diverse aspects of life, including employment, education and social engagement. A number of deaf participants recounted how they had, at times, been the object of ridicule and derision during their childhood. These accounts were particularly striking amongst those who had previously attended hearing schools, where their status as 'outsiders' had become even more conspicuous:

Seeing my hearing class-mates playing was like looking at a photograph. I didn't know what they were saying. So watching them was like just looking at a photograph, I didn't have any information and I couldn't hear anything. The hearing people teased me when I was younger. They made funny hand movements at me and teased me. I was very angry with them. (D6)

As this participant went on to recount, his time at the hearing school was further characterised by a complete dependence on hearing students in order to meet expectations within the classroom:

At school, I couldn't hear when the school bell rang so I just observed the other hearing students' movements and followed them...When they went into class as school began I followed them to the class. When the hearing students prepared to go home as the school bell rang, I also prepared to go home. I could only do things by observing and following the hearing students.” (D6)

A number of participants also described their relationships with teachers during their time spent at hearing schools. In lieu of developing friendships with hearing peers, some recalled spending their spare time in the company of a compassionate teacher. Others recounted the ignorance and intolerance that certain teachers had demonstrated regarding their deafness, with some describing the maltreatment that they had endured as a result of this:

I was punished by the teacher [in the hearing school], who pulled my ears. She yelled at me, "Can't you hear me when I'm talking to you that loud already?" and she pulled my ear and beat me. It was a bitter feeling for me. (D16)

### **6.2.2. The accounts of parents and carers**

As a result of the social stigma surrounding deafness and the consequent potential for discrimination and abuse, a number of mothers described their decision to restrict the social interactions of their deaf children:

I don't really let him go out in the neighborhood because people might tease him.

That would have a bad effect on me, and it might jeopardise my relationship with other people if they tease him. (P4)

I didn't really let him out with other kids. He would just stay at home...I didn't want them to tease him or anything, or to do anything to my child. So if he wanted to play, he would just play with me. (P5)

The majority of parents in this study had never met another deaf person prior to enrolling their child at the school. With no deaf role models, parents were left feeling isolated and uncertain about how best to support their child. As one mother explained:

I didn't have any experience of anything like it, it had never happened to anyone around me before. Where I live is kind of like a rural area and so there were no other cases like it. (P3)

Bringing their children to the Mary Chapman School and coming into contact with sign language not only helped communication, but also appeared to play a pivotal role in fostering more positive parental attitudes regarding their child's deafness:

Before, it was quite upsetting for me. But coming here gives me joy. I'm very happy to be here. Before, it was quite depressing. Coming here heals me [...] For the father also, because he was quite upset, I told him 'you have to come and see this'. After coming to the school I told him 'it's not just your child who is deaf. There are many other children'. It makes me feel quite relieved. (P6)

It is notable that the majority of studies into parental adjustment have adopted the medical model of deafness, concentrating on themes such as recovering from loss, coping with stress and grieving (see, for example, Calderon and Greenberg, 2012; Kurtzer-White and Luterman, 2003). While a number of parents in this study expressed a residual sense of sorrow regarding their child's deafness, the interview data suggests that being in a culturally deaf environment contributed to the process of adjustment by encouraging a more positive conceptualisation of deafness and engendering a sense of belonging (see also Young, 1999):

Seeing the kids, seeing this school. It made me happy. It feels like it's our own place. (P3)

Similarly, the following quote from a pupil's grandmother suggests that spending time in a deaf environment had played a direct role in her process of adjustment:

I was quite upset. It was quite shocking when I found out [that he was deaf]. But now that I have experience in this type of environment, and seeing all the other children, I don't feel that sad anymore. Everything has changed. (P6)

It should be noted, however, that the mothers and carers included in this research are somewhat exceptional in that they spend their days in the compound socialising together, as well as volunteering in the classroom. The majority of parents cannot regularly attend the school; many live at a prohibitive distance from Yangon while others are unavailable due to work commitments.

### **6.2.3. Disability in Myanmar: social exclusion and stigma**

As a result of the lack of outreach programmes in Myanmar, parental awareness regarding ways to support deaf children is typically limited, further restricting the extent to which deaf children are able to participate socially. As UNICEF representative Bertrand Bainval stated in a news article for the Myanmar Times, disability in general is a largely hidden phenomenon within the country:

When you walk along the streets or go to a school, you don't see signs of disability in Myanmar. [Disabled people] are invisible – this is nothing surprising because it happens everywhere in the world

(cited in Yamon Phu Thit and Mudditt, 2013)

In addition to the difficulties described by the mothers in this study, the Principal of the Mary Chapman School pointed out that deaf children across Myanmar are often kept at home due to the shame associated with disability and deafness. Widely held misconceptions regarding deaf people's academic potential may also influence the



decision to keep deaf children at home. For instance, one woman in Yangon who had little personal experience of deafness explained how her friend had a deaf son but had decided not to send him to school, assuming that it would be of little benefit to him. Without access to education these deaf children are typically resigned to a life of social isolation (see Ladd, 2003). A number of deaf participants in this study reflected on their encounters with deaf adults who had never attended school, describing individuals on the very periphery of social interaction:

When I go back to where my parents live there is a family of three. The parents are both hearing but the daughter is over 18 and she's deaf. When I tried to communicate with her she seemed really afraid, she doesn't really have sign language or anything to communicate with. (D8)

In many ways, these observations bear close resemblance to participants' accounts of their own lives before attending school. Indeed, this deaf person drew a direct comparison to his childhood experiences:

There are many deaf people all over Myanmar who never went to school. It's difficult for them to get information. It's like when I was very young. (D8)

In nearly all cases participants linked the social isolation of these individuals to a lack of sign language and limited contact with other deaf people. One deaf participant, whose outreach work with a deaf bible group had brought her into contact with many deaf adults in rural areas, described the social opportunities that sign language and deaf-deaf interaction can bring to these individuals:

They live very insular lives. But when they start meeting other deaf people they begin to feel more confident, their world opens up and their sadness eases. When you start to show them about deaf people they start to see more possibilities for themselves. Being around hearing people who are always talking amongst themselves, they just have to sit out of the conversation, be quiet you know, and so they feel shy. But please, no, they don't have to be like that. We show them sign language and things start opening up for them." (D19)

#### **6.2.4. Attending the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf**

For participants in this study, attending the Mary Chapman School represented a similarly critical juncture in their lives, marking their first contact with sign language and other deaf people. Many described their transition to the school in revelatory terms, often drawing on vivid YSL metaphors such as VISION-EXPAND or MIND-OPEN to describe their newfound engagement with the world:

Before coming to the school it's like being in the dark. Then after one month, two months your eyes gradually start to open! You slowly start to learn, take things on. (D2)

When I came here I saw all the deaf people and I started to get it, before I had been very alone. It was great to be around so many other people. (D19)

As participants described, attending the school and learning sign language precipitated an array of social developments, including active social participation and growing self-esteem.

Before [school] I couldn't use sign language. I didn't have much confidence in myself. I was always looking at others and feeling worried and afraid. But when I could use sign language well, then I could express my thoughts and the people I communicated with were able to understand me. It felt so free and open. I didn't have to be afraid and scared anymore. (D18)

Life has changed a lot now. That is because I have come to school. Since I came here I can communicate well with my deaf friends and I have more confidence when I go out as well. That's because I came here. (D23)

As Jambor and Elliot (2005) highlight, a positive experience of school and identifying as members of a minority group are highly correlated to self-esteem for both ethnic minorities and deaf individuals, offering solidarity and protection from prejudice. During the interviews participants talked with particular confidence when describing their strategies for dealing with the negative attitudes towards deafness and sign language that

they periodically encounter in society:

I think some people look down on sign language, but I don't care, I'm not embarrassed. Yeah some people are like that. I'm not ashamed. Forget them, I'll carry on signing. (D5)

People will see us communicating in sign language and some people look down on us, some people think deaf people have a low IQ and that deaf people are stupid. We feel that. But my friends and I don't care and so we just keep on signing. (D12)

I don't feel shy or anything because of using sign language in public. I don't care about [hearing people with negative attitudes]. (D24)

These confident assertions stand in stark contrast to participants' recollections of interacting in public before attending the school. This is not to suggest, however, that deaf people are emotionally impervious to negative societal attitudes. Many described their sadness and anger regarding the lack of deaf awareness amongst the general public, especially when this manifests as mockery, although the importance of resilience, 'letting go' of angry feelings and avoiding confrontation, was stressed. However, by refusing to compromise their linguistic behaviour these deaf people do in fact engage in a form of resistance. While the need to communicate amongst each other is a key factor in the decision to use YSL regardless of negative reactions, this pragmatically orientated explanation does not capture the full significance of their language practices. Notably, the right to use YSL in public was overwhelmingly described in terms of defying the stigma associated with deafness and sign language, with little mention of practicality. To this extent, deaf people's insistence on using YSL without inhibition can be read as a form of political action; an assertion of their right to inhabit the public sphere on their own terms, as members of a cultural and linguistic minority.

### **6.2.5. Entering the deaf community**

For deaf participants in the younger generation, membership in this minority community

is determined primarily by a shared deaf identity, which has little to do with auditory status but is based instead on a shared language and culture<sup>38</sup>. In the interviews participants reflected on the sense of belonging that this new identity and community membership had afforded them, often contrasting this with the social isolation that they had experienced before attending the school:

Gradually, I learnt how to use sign language and I realised that I am deaf. I was happy. (D15)

I don't feel sad or feel anything like that anymore. I know I'm a real deaf person. (D6)

In claiming this positive deaf identity, participants radically reconstruct the meaning of deafness, subverting wider societal understandings in what Ladd (2003, p. 258) refers to as the 'major impulse towards redefining and reshaping one's self by moving from a 'hearing-impaired' identity towards actualizing a Deaf one'. Indeed, it was common for deaf people in Yangon to distance themselves from dominant societal discourse in which deafness is linked to disability and deficiency, emphasising instead their status as an independent and highly capable linguistic community. As one participant put it:

I'd like to tell [people who look down on deaf people] we're not less intellectual, not mentally disabled, that we're using our own language. I'd like to tell them that mental disability and deafness is not the same thing. We're just using our own language. We're deaf and we're independent, intelligent people. (D12)

Although many participants described entering into the deaf community and acquiring a positive deaf identity in straightforward terms it should be noted that for others, realising this alternative identity and overcoming the dominant notion of 'deafness as deficiency' was a fraught process. In one interview a deaf man described his initial anger at being sent to the deaf school:

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<sup>38</sup> Older deaf people's experiences of deafness and community membership are discussed in section 6.13.1 of this chapter.

Interviewer: And when you arrived here and you realised it was a deaf school, can you tell me a bit about why you were so angry?

D16: I didn't know sign language and I didn't like being a deaf person. I didn't know how to use sign language. I thought 'I can speak. So, why do I have to be at this school?' I was angry because I was sent to this school even though I could speak. I thought this school is for those who are really deaf. For me, I could speak and I could also hear a little bit. So I was angry for being sent here. But, gradually, my mind changed and I started to be happy. I started to accept it.

In addition to his unfamiliarity with sign language, this participant also described his total lack of self-identification as a culturally deaf person during this time, defining those who were 'really deaf' on the basis of their complete inability to speak or hear. Distancing himself from what was seen as an alien and ultimately deficient identity, he emphasised his residual hearing and capacity for speech. Nevertheless, his outlook altered over time and, as he went on to explain, he eventually came to embrace his life at the school:

Now I can communicate well in sign language and I like this situation very much. Now I can say thanks to my mum [for finding the school]. (D16)

Learning sign language and gaining access to the deaf community was central to this re-assessment of his situation, prompting a fundamental re-conceptualisation of his identity; that of a culturally deaf sign language user. This striking departure from his previous efforts to cultivate his residual hearing and disassociate from 'really deaf' people is well illustrated in his response to a question regarding the use of hearing aids:

I don't use the hearing aid. I don't like it. It's very noisy. I like the way of being completely deaf. So I'm nothing like a hearing person. I just want to be a completely deaf person. (D16)

The medical model of deafness (see Chapter 1, section 1.6) would interpret this reference to being 'completely deaf' purely in terms of auditory level. However, it is likely that for this participant being completely deaf and 'nothing like a hearing person' pertains more significantly to cultural identification and the pride of being a deaf sign language user.

While a few participants reflected on how life might be easier if they were able to hear, an opposition to hearing aids and also to speech training was widespread in the community, with many participants asserting their contentment with being deaf and strongly resisting the pressure to assimilate to the hearing world (the rejection of speech amongst sectors of the community is discussed in greater detail in section 6.13.1).

### **6.3. Interim summary**

This brief overview of deaf people's life experiences and their reflections on the meaning of deafness illustrates how the Mary Chapman School has served as a crucible for linguistic and personal development, offering opportunities for social participation and engendering a sense of identity and group belonging for both deaf students and their parents. Attending the school and learning YSL provided deaf participants with the opportunity to transition from a life of extreme social isolation to one of inclusion, easy communication and education. During this process participants did not simply come to accept their deafness, but engaged in a much more profound process of transformation whereby they fundamentally reconstructed the meaning of being deaf, subverting dominant definitions and rejecting the 'deficient' identity that was typically imposed upon them.

In many ways, participants' reflections on identity and community membership bore close resemblance to the various accounts of deaf cultural life found within the Deaf Studies academic literature (see, for example, Lane, 1992; Padden and Humphries, 1988). Yet it should not be assumed that deaf culture in Yangon corresponds exactly to that of other deaf communities. As Ladd (2003) states, there has been a reductive tendency within deaf cultural analysis, with scholars often pre-supposing the existence of a universal deaf culture. In fact, theories of deaf identity and deaf culture originated within the context of Western academic discourse, thus it should not be assumed that these concepts can be adopted indiscriminately from the literature and applied to all community contexts (Branson and Miller, 2004; Kusters, 2009; Ladd, 2003). As Ladd (2008) points out, unique constructions of deafness can be observed between countries, with different

communities prioritising distinct aspects of their culture. Moreover, as described in the Introduction chapter (section 1.3.2), there are multiple experiences of deafness within a single community. Additionally, Branson and Miller (2002) refer to the widespread yet equally problematic assumption within academia that being deaf will necessarily take precedence over other aspects of a person's identity. As Skelton and Valentine (2003) illustrate in their study of deaf British adolescents, being deaf interacts with other unique life experiences to produce intricate and diverse identities. The following sections of this chapter take into consideration the heterogeneous experiences of being deaf and belonging to the deaf community in Yangon, attending to the complex and dynamic ways in which deaf identity interacts with other social experiences to shape participants' language practices, ideologies and views on social justice.

#### **6.4. YSL and identity**

During the fieldwork a number of participants referred to an intrinsic link between YSL and their cultural identity. As one participant put it:

It comes out of our identity and culture. It's our language! (*D7*)

However, asking participants to elaborate on the specifics of this link tended to yield minimal responses. As Hinton and Ahlers (1999) assert, it is not always possible for language users to locate exactly where in the language something as abstract as identity is located. In fact, it was only when describing their opposition to lexical borrowing that participants in this study tended to expand on the nature of this relationship. During these discussions two main narratives emerged that linked YSL and identity. At the macro level the language was valued for mediating the group's experiences of the world around them, embodying salient aspects of the regional and national cultural context in which the community is located. At the micro level YSL was seen to emerge naturally from the day-to-day cultural practices of the community, developing endogenously as a result of deaf interpersonal communication in Yangon. The following section demonstrates the way in which both of these narratives fed into potent ideologies of linguistic authenticity

as participants eschewed foreign borrowings and emphasised the importance of maintaining linguistic purity by using only linguistic forms that were firmly rooted in community life, thus constituting a genuine expression of group identity. Moreover, as later sections of the chapter go on to demonstrate, these ideologies of identity and authenticity also shaped community responses to other linguistic practices and forms of language change, representing a significant component of community LPP.

## **6.5. Community opposition to lexical borrowing**

As mentioned above, an overwhelming opposition to lexical borrowing prevailed within the community, and the topic frequently prompted lively and forthright discussion, both during interviews and focus groups as well as in day-to-day conversations. While participants of all ages were unequivocal in their rejection of loanwords, many lamented the fact that certain foreign signs had been adopted by some within the community:

Sometimes people add in foreign signs when they're signing. Well, I don't care much for it. They pick up foreign signs and then mix them into their Myanmar Sign Language<sup>39</sup>. When I see it I think it's a bit wrong really. (D33)

I've seen [foreign borrowing] happen a little bit. I just let them carry on with it. I don't want to say anything to them really as I'm quite a quiet person. But really it's better just to use your own Myanmar Sign Language rather than taking lots of signs from ASL or BSL. You shouldn't really do that. (D31)

It was notable that when participants were asked if they could provide examples of such borrowings they would nearly always refer to the ASL signs for 'mother' and 'father', struggling to specify any other cases. It was beyond the scope of the study to gauge the extent to which other foreign items were used within the community. However, the fact that lexical borrowing was perceived as a threat, along with the emotional and ideological responses that this belief triggered, were of more analytical value to the aims of the research than a systematic account of loanword usage. To this extent, repeated references

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<sup>39</sup>During these discussions participants regularly referred to Myanmar Sign Language rather than Yangon Sign Language. The significance of this change in nomenclature is discussed in section 6.5.



to the American signs for ‘mother’ and ‘father’ (referred to in translations as MOTHER 2 FATHER 2)<sup>40</sup> appeared to serve a portentous function in the community, drawing attention to the need to safeguard against further foreign intrusions.

A number of participants, particularly from the younger generation, acknowledged that they had in fact used these two ASL signs themselves. Notably, such disclosures tended to be presented in terms of past linguistic behaviour, with participants describing the way in which they had adjusted their linguistic practices upon becoming aware of the origins of the signs:

These are the ASL signs for MOTHER2 and FATHER2 and someone introduced them here, I don’t know who. Anyway, I thought they were Myanmar signs when I was growing up and then I found out and so I stopped using them and used the signs MOTHER1 [shows Yangon sign], the Myanmar sign. I changed straight away to use MOTHER1. (D5)

When some people visited from America they saw me using MOTHER2 and FATHER2. I told them that I didn’t know that they are from American Sign Language. They were just passed down to us so I’d been using them but I didn’t really know. I felt a bit embarrassed about that. I felt a bit embarrassed when they pointed it out to me. It’s better to use MOTHER1 and FATHER1. After that happened I switched to use MOTHER1 FATHER1. We should just use Myanmar signs. (D6)

While accounts of this type were common, observations within the community revealed that the ASL signs MOTHER2 and FATHER2 were in fact used routinely, representing a firmly entrenched feature of the younger generation’s linguistic repertoire. With a sense of regret one signer in her late forties explained:

With the signs FATHER2 and MOTHER2, previously someone at the school from the older generation studied ASL and they showed those signs to the students and so they spread out. It’s not something that you can really change

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<sup>40</sup> MOTHER1 and FATHER1 refer to YSL signs

once people start using it, because they're totally used to that sign now, so we can't really go back to the old signs. (D29)

Despite her insight and sensitive analysis of the situation this participant remained staunchly opposed to the use of these signs. The fieldnotes below demonstrate the way in which she playfully policed such usage within the community:

*During a lull in activity in the handicraft room, one of the deaf female volunteers in her early 50s started to tease one of the younger male workers about his use of ASL signs for 'mother' and 'father'. He jokingly responded that the Yangon signs were hard to form, requiring him to twist his hands into cumbersome positions. At this point the head of the handicraft room, a woman also in her late 40s, entered into the discussion. With a wry smile she declared that she would like to throw all the ASL signs on a big fire and see them go up in smoke. She then made her way energetically around the room asking each of the five people in the room which sign for 'mother' and 'father' they used. Everyone responded with the Yangon signs, much to her obvious delight. Accompanied by a good deal of laughter, some good-natured gloating ensued, in which the two older women playfully teased the man for his use of the ASL signs.*

Linguistic prescriptivism was pervasive in the community and similar interactions were observed on various occasions. Indeed, during the interviews and focus groups a number of participants described taking personal responsibility for monitoring and suppressing the use of borrowed signs in the community. Others recalled instances in which they had been admonished by their peers for using such signs. While such discussion typically focused on the use of ASL, the adoption of signs from Mandalay Sign Language attracted similar levels of antipathy<sup>41</sup>. With minimal contact between the Yangon and Mandalay deaf communities (as described in Chapter 2, section 2.7), it is most likely that the use of any Mandalay signs in Yangon can be attributed to the introduction of the standardised

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<sup>41</sup> As noted in chapter 2 (section 2.6), there has been no linguistic research on sign language in Myanmar and no lexicostatistical analysis to determine any relationship between YSL and other sign languages, including Mandalay Sign Language.

sign language book, which contains signs from both regions (see Chapter 2, section 2.13 for a description of the standardised sign language book and Chapter 7 for a detailed account of responses to language standardisation). Indeed, some individuals described having experimented with signs from the book, although most recalled how this had been frowned upon, attracting negative attention from their peers. This is demonstrated in the following focus group interaction:

D3: If someone uses a Mandalay sign then people might say ‘hey! You’re using Mandalay sign language!’. That happens.

D5: They’ll say ‘Why not go and live in Mandalay!’. Like, I used the Mandalay sign for MOTHER which is in this [standardised sign language] book, and then some people said that to me, so then I had to change back to Yangon signs. They said ‘I’ll send you to Mandalay!’.

D3: Yeah ‘I’ll send you off to Mandalay!’. When people say that I think, ‘oh my god, no!’ so I quickly changed my signing. [laughing]

D10: Yeah, some of my friends told me the same, you know ‘you’re using Mandalay signs so just go to Mandalay’

*(Focus group discussion)*

As was typical for such discussion, these three participants went on to concede that it was in fact better to use only Yangon signs.

When explaining their aversion to foreign borrowing it was common for participants to refer, in the first instance, to the impracticality of using such signs. Many people referred to the difficulty of comprehending foreign signs, describing the negative impact that this had on communication. While this concern is understandable, it was notable that the numerous new signs developing from within the community were not considered to be problematic in the same way. In fact, these neologisms were typically embraced, with the vast majority of participants viewing these new signs favourably, and with many expressing their willingness to learn them (see section 6.10 for a detailed ideological

analysis regarding linguistic innovation). To this extent, the dismissal of foreign signs on the basis of incomprehensibility could be viewed simply as a pretext for resisting unwanted intrusions. However, a more precise analysis, informed by local ideologies and an understanding of the distinct structural properties of sign languages, offers deeper insight into the significance of these assertions and their link to cultural identity.

Notably, when elaborating on statements regarding the difficulty of understanding foreign signs, many participants described their inability to ‘connect’ to these signs, often citing their lack of cultural relevance:

It’s better to use you own natural sign language, not keep adding other [foreign] signs to your natural language. It’s wrong really. It’s like there’s a missing connection. Those signs just don’t feel right. (*D33*)

If we were to have those [foreign] signs enter our language it wouldn’t feel right, you know, because it’s not connected to our culture. (*D7*)

One way in which signs may relate to culture can be explained in terms of their iconic potential. As briefly noted in Chapter 2, the visual modality of signed languages grants signers the capacity to physically depict salient features of a referent within the linguistic form. In fact, it should be noted that iconic signs reflect culture on two distinct levels, not only representing aspects of the surrounding environment, but also exemplifying the cultural priorities and cognitive processes of the group. The relationship between an iconic sign and its referent is not predictable, but is selected from a pool of culturally appropriate options as determined by the group’s mental models of the referent. As Taub (2001, pp. 19–20) points out, iconic signs are ‘partially motivated by our embodied experiences common to all humans and partially by our experiences in particular cultures and societies’. Consequently, iconic signs that develop extraneous to the community may be seen as less meaningful. Participants referred to both aspects of iconicity as they discussed the cultural pertinence of YSL and its relevance to identity:

Interviewer: can you tell me a bit more about how the language is linked to your

identity and culture?

D2: Well, the signs for the times of the day relates to how the sun looks in the signs...it's to do with how we see things.

D7: Yeah, for example the sign 'watermelon' relates to the way we eat a watermelon. Or, in Myanmar people eat with their hands and so EAT is signed like this [shows a hand to mouth motion]. But in other places like China it might be signed like this [produces a sign referring to chopsticks]. If we were to have those signs enter our language it wouldn't feel right, you know, because it's not connected to our culture.

The sign for 'water' in Yangon sign is like a drop of water. In Mandalay it's like waves. It's connected to the cultural environment. But in Thailand they're using the sign from ASL so they use a sign made with the W handshape, it's taken from the English word. It's not connected to the culture.<sup>42</sup> (D5)

Indeed, with signs able to embody cultural experience iconically, participants not only saw foreign signs as being inappropriate for community use, but also considered lexical variation at the regional level to be a natural state of affairs, resulting from distinct physical and cultural environments and the unique worldviews of different groups of sign language users:

The signs people have for different objects depends on the way they perceive them...For example, in Yangon, Mandalay and Chin State they all have different perspectives so there are differences in the signs. (D19)

People who live in different regions have different perspectives, they come from different backgrounds and so their environmental influences are different and that affects the language. (D21)

Given the pertinence of iconic signs to cultural experience at both the national and regional level, participants not only described their sense of disconnect regarding

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<sup>42</sup> The 'W handshape' refers to the letter W as produced in American Sign Language manual alphabet.

American Signs, but also expressed similar views in relation to signs from Mandalay. As one participant explained during a conversation on Mandalay Sign Language:

It's hard to feel a connection to the signs that are not from Yangon (*D14*)

To this extent, when defending the purity of the language, participants would often engage in the semiotic process of fractal recursivity (see Literature Review, section 3.2), employing the concept of iconic relevance not only to distinguish authentic Myanmar signs from foreign signs, but also to distinguish authentic Yangon signs from Mandalay signs. As Irvine and Gal (2000, p. 38) assert, projecting an opposition at one level of identity onto another in this way “provide[s] actors with the discursive or cultural resources to claim and thus attempt to create shifting “communities” identities, selves, and roles, at different levels of contrast”. Indeed, participants stressed their sense of cultural belonging at both the local and national level and would draw on these two aspects of their identity strategically when reflecting on lexical borrowing. As mentioned in footnote 37 (this section), people would regularly alternate between the terms Yangon Sign Language and Myanmar Sign Language when referring to their language, similarly describing themselves as either Yangon people or Myanmar people. Crucially, participants would systematically foreground one of these identities over the other, depending on the context of the discussion; when referring to borrowing from languages outside of the country participants would favour their Myanmar identity, yet when reflecting on contact with Mandalay Sign Language they would emphasise their allegiance to Yangon. The following example, taken from a single focus group session, demonstrates the way in which one participant refers to both Yangon and Myanmar Signs depending on the discursive context:

No, we just use our Yangon signs, they come easily.  
[whilst discussing the use of Mandalay signs in the standardised sign language book] (*D3*)

We shouldn't let Myanmar sign go downhill like that, we have to protect it, support it to grow.

[whilst discussing the spread of ASL around the world] (D3)

By foregrounding the aspect of their linguistic identity that is most opposed to the source of the threat, participants emphasise the lack of relevance that the respective sign has to their linguistic identity, and thus its lack of suitability for community use.

## **6.6. Concerns about language loss**

The perceived cultural incongruity of iconically irrelevant signs was not the only concern that participants raised regarding foreign borrowing; at times they also referred to a more fundamental anxiety regarding the possibility of language loss and the need to maintain local control over the language to ensure its continued vitality:

Borrowing signs destroys our own sign language in a way. We should stop using [foreign signs] and just use Myanmar signs. (D10)

It's like [ASL] is engulfing our language, influencing it. We need to create our own natural signs. (D17)

You know, all around the world ASL signs like MOTHER2 and FATHER2 are used in so many places now. We're not interested in it. We want our own signs. (D5)

Participants in one focus group articulated concerns that foreign borrowing would lead not only to language shift, but also to cultural degradation:

D3: If you borrow signs you'll lose Myanmar culture and that's no good, that's your own culture. Don't just abandon it!

D5: You know, ASL signs should exist in America. Myanmar signs are ours. Each country has its own way. An expert from Hong Kong<sup>43</sup> said that in Thailand they had a very rich sign language but now Thai sign language has almost disappeared and ASL has totally taken over. That can't happen here in Myanmar.

D3: We shouldn't let Myanmar sign go downhill like that, we have to protect it, support it to grow.

*(Focus group discussion)*

In order to explore the significance of these concerns the following section examines the way in which deaf people also attributed value to the intimate and mutually constitutive relationship that exists between YSL and the community, often emphasising the exclusively deaf origins of the language. This analysis offers further insight into the reasons behind community opposition to foreign borrowing and illustrates the way in which this additional link between YSL and identity presents participants with further discursive resources for resisting the use of foreign signs.

## **6.7. Language and community developing in tandem**

As described in section 6.2.4, YSL is integral to the Yangon deaf community, facilitating interactions between deaf people and giving rise to a group united not only by the experience of deafness, but also by a common language. In turn, learning YSL presents deaf individuals with the opportunity to enter this community, encouraging their identification as culturally deaf. In addition to recognising the fundamental role that YSL plays in the construction of the community and deaf identity, participants also demonstrated a strong awareness of the community origins of the language. As such,

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<sup>43</sup> During the interviews two other participants also mentioned attending workshops in which they had come into contact with Deaf Studies scholars from Hong Kong. As mentioned in Chapter 2, the YSL dictionary project also involves collaboration with the University of Hong Kong. As Myanmar rejoins the international community dynamics within the Yangon deaf community are likely to shift in various directions as deaf people come into contact with other deaf communities around the world. While a number of participants pointed out that contact with deaf people of other nationalities could lead to loanwords entering the community, the extracts above suggest that increased international contact may also present opportunities to engage in discussion on topics such as language shift and change.



people would often refer to the social construction of YSL, emphasising its development as a result of deaf interactions. As one participant explained:

The sign language at this school came out naturally from deaf people. (D34)

Elaborating on this point, she continued to describe the process in greater detail:

For example, when deaf people gather in the evenings in the teashops they sign together and some new signs might develop from those conversations. Then people will use those signs again at another time, and so the language spreads out in that way. So it develops from deaf people themselves. (D34)

During the interviews participants also recounted their experiences of learning the language, once again emphasising the endogenous nature of this process and the way in which this learning had almost exclusively occurred between deaf peers at the school, without intervention from hearing teachers.

I wasn't taught sign language through lessons with a teacher or anything, I just picked it up as I hung out with my friends. (D21)

I learnt how to use sign language by observing [other deaf students] and trying to communicate with them. So, I learnt sign language from the deaf people. I didn't get much from the hearing teachers in the classroom. (D6)

There were only a few things that I learnt from what the teachers taught me. I learnt the sign language more from my classmates, the junior and senior students. (D23)

Reflecting on the mutually constitutive relationship between language and community, one participant remarked on the way in which this mode of language transmission serves a significant bonding function, strengthening the relationship between students of different ages:

Because [YSL] gets passed down through the generations the younger signers look up to us to learn the language. So there's that connection too. (D14)

Another participant described this intra-community transmission as contributing to the development and growth of the language:

In this school, the senior students pass down the sign language to the junior students and it has developed in the process. So, I learned sign language by observing how the others used it and also by using it myself. (D24)

The in-community development and transmission of the language represented a clear source of pride for participants, who appeared to equate linguistic autonomy with the independence and strength of the community. In this way, YSL was viewed as symbolic of the community's collective creativity and their ability to shape a rich and meaningful life for themselves despite the adverse social conditions that deaf people in Myanmar typically face. Indeed, when articulating their resistance to foreign borrowings participants not only focused on the cultural incongruence of such signs (as described in section 6.5), but also made reference to the local, deaf, development and ownership of the language and the importance of this to their sense of identity. As one participant explained when asked about his disliking of loanwords:

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit about why it's important to use your own signs [rather than any foreign signs]?

D6: It's our own language that we grew up using. It wasn't taught to us, it developed from the deaf people communicating with each other, that's how it developed. If people come to visit we can learn a little bit and use interpreters. But when they've gone we should use our own language. We shouldn't copy their language.

Although the academic literature has overwhelmingly positioned essentialism and constructivism as mutually exclusive perspectives regarding the relationship between language and identity (see Literature Review, section 3.3), it was notable that deaf people's awareness of the social construction of both YSL and the community did not appear to dampen rhetoric regarding the intrinsic link between the two. Indeed, as in the

above quote, participants would often make reference to the local development of YSL when emphasising community ownership of the language and the importance of linguistic purity. Furthermore, when reflecting on the virtues of linguistic purity it was common for participants to contrast YSL with the sign language used in Mandalay, which they described as being heavily influenced by foreign sign languages and hearing people:

We think that YSL is more natural than Mandalay Sign Language. I mean, all sign languages develop naturally but sometimes they can be influenced by teachers who say, “That's not the right way!” or “This is the correct way of signing this word!” Also in Mandalay some words are taken from the foreign sign languages. For example, THANK YOU [shows sign] is the sign from ASL. Yangon has no foreign language mixed into it. I think it's better to use the signs that naturally come out from our own culture. It's not good to adopt signs from foreign sign languages. (D6)

Mandalay sign language has been very influenced by hearing teachers; it's not really developed naturally from deaf people. Then there is Yangon sign language, which developed naturally from the deaf people. (D29)

While participants described varying degrees of personal proficiency in Mandalay Sign Language, the majority stated that they had only ever had very limited exposure to the language. To this extent, it was not clear exactly what such comparisons between the two languages were based on. Moreover, when differentiating between the languages in this way, participants effectively ‘erased’ any influence that foreign sign languages and hearing people may have had on the development of YSL. For instance, while teachers at the Mary Chapman School tended to recognise deaf ownership of YSL and often deferred to students in matters concerning the language (as described in Chapter 5, section 5.3) this is not to say that they have had no influence on the language at all. Furthermore, as described in section 6.5, within other contexts participants had in fact drawn attention to the use of borrowed signs in YSL. Crucially, these conflicting portrayals of loanword usage in YSL appeared to form the basis of distinct discursive strategies, each ultimately aimed at discouraging lexical borrowing and safeguarding the language and community from outside influence. Specifically, by lamenting the regular use of loanwords in YSL

participants highlight the substantive risk that this linguistic behaviour poses to the future integrity of the language (as described in section 6.6). In contrast, by engaging in the semiotic process of erasure and denying the occurrence of any outside linguistic intrusions participants were able to draw a striking, and also cautionary, contrast to languages which have allegedly been corrupted by these outside forces.

## **6.8. Lexical borrowing as ‘language theft’**

In addition to the strategies described above, participants also employed a narrative of ‘language theft’ when discussing foreign borrowings:

Using signs from other countries is as though Myanmar is stealing sign language from others. (D18)

It’s like stealing from those other languages. It’s better to use Burmese signs. (D27)

When asked to elaborate on this notion of ‘stealing’, one participant reflected on what he perceived to be the laziness of borrowing from other languages, and the way in which this behaviour inhibited the linguistic creativity of the community:

D20: Borrowing from foreign sign languages is like copying others' signs...It's kind of like stealing

Interviewer: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

D20: It's like just taking a language instead of creating a language of our own for us to use [...] Instead of using our own creative minds we get influenced by something else.

As previously described, linguistic creativity and the community’s ability to develop signs was highly prized by participants, central to their sense of belonging to an independent community, and also to their status as ‘owners’ of the language. With signs

regarded as a unique product of specific communities in this way, and with language ownership thus inextricably tied to local linguistic production, using signs that ‘belong’ to other communities was highly problematic. Indeed, accompanying the community discourse on language theft and closely linked to concerns regarding the loss of linguistic creativity and independence were regular references to the shame that linguistic borrowing would bring to the community:

D29: if we use signs from other sign languages, for example American, Japanese or Thai, then people from other countries might look and say, ‘oh Myanmar people are using our language’. They might think like that.

Interviewer: How would that make you feel?

D29: It would be shameful. We'd lose our face as Myanmar people.

Interviewer: Do you both agree?

D29 and D13 (together): Yes

D13: Yeah, like she said, if people saw us using borrowed signs we would lose face... it would be embarrassing.

*(Focus group discussion)*

You should use culturally Myanmar signs. That's the right way. It's wrong to use foreign signs. You should keep them separate. If you use signs from other countries, like ASL for example, and someone from that country comes and sees then how can you feel proud? You should use Myanmar signs. I would feel very ashamed to be known as someone who takes signs from other countries. (D3)

Crucially, lexical borrowing not only represents a threat to the authenticity of the language but also risks undermining the legitimacy of the group. For deaf people in Yangon, YSL is symbolic of the creativity and resilience of the group and their ability to successfully construct an independent and thriving linguistic community in the face of social stigmatisation and disadvantage. Thus, to use signs from other countries risks

trivialising these shared experiences, jeopardising the highly prized sense of linguistic independence and creativity upon which deaf people base their collective identity. In this way, participants' commitment to linguistic purity and their campaign against loanwords may be read, at least in part, as a struggle for group autonomy. As Henningsen in Kroskrity (1998, p. 109) states "the politics of purity... originates in a quest for identity and authenticity of a cultural Self that feels threatened by the hegemonic pressure of another culture." Expressing a similar sentiment during a discussion on borrowings, one participant stated:

We can use our own language, stand on our own two feet! (*D29*)

## **6.9. Interim summary**

So far this chapter has examined the various links that participants postulated regarding the relationship between YSL and community identity. These linkages were typically evoked during debate over the suitability of specific linguistic forms, feeding into two distinct community conceptualisations of linguistic authenticity. In a notable departure from the majority of academic accounts of authenticity (see Literature Review, section 3.7), ancestral forms and diachronic uniformity were not meaningful concepts for deaf people in Yangon, where the community has only a relatively short history. Instead, participants emphasised the importance of linguistic forms that have emerged from and thus express the shared experiences of the community. Significantly, these ideologies appeared to fulfill a significant political function, providing participants with the resources to construct a compelling case against the use of foreign loanwords and feeding into various discursive strategies and semiotic processes aimed at protecting the community from this type of perceived cultural encroachment.

## **6.10. Lexical variation and 'polynomie' in the Yangon deaf community**

The near-universal opposition to borrowed signs was not accompanied by an outright linguistic conservatism within the community. In contrast to participants' resistance to foreign loanwords, lexical variation within the community was generally referred to with

enthusiasm and pride. As described in Chapter 2 (section 2.12) the nature of sign language transmission in deaf schools typically results in a high degree of linguistic variation, with significant lexical and grammatical differences observable between different generations of signers. This was certainly the case in Yangon where deaf people as well as teachers frequently remarked on the continual development of new signs amongst the younger generation of students. Consequently, learning YSL was often described as a life-long undertaking and many deaf people referred to the importance of inter-generational linguistic exchange and learning the new signs from the younger generation:

The sign language is always growing. It's never ending, always developing. Yangon sign language is like any other language, always developing. The younger generation uses a lot of new signs. I don't reject those new signs, I accept them and I always exchange signs with them when we chat. (D21)

The language keeps being added to and developing. We can't just use the same word all the time. We need to keep learning, not just stick with the signs we've always known it. (D24)

When I don't understand something, I ask, "What do you mean by this?" and someone will explain it to me. We just go on in this way. As I'm older there are some things I don't understand. A young person once signed something like this [shows sign]. I asked them what it meant and they told me it means 'deception' or 'deceive'. Then I knew. It's how I understand the meaning of each new word. (D23)

Despite the barriers that neologisms can pose for intergenerational intelligibility (discussed further in section 6.11), linguistic innovation amongst students at the school was not considered by the Yangon community to be problematic at an ideological level. In fact, as long as these new signs were seen to have emerged 'authentically' amongst deaf people (as described above in section 6.7), then the constant development of new signs was accepted as a natural and, moreover, positive development:

Now the younger generation has a lot of new signs but that's fine, I let them be because it's their own natural way of communicating. (D31)

The way the younger people sign, the new words that they use, is good. Older people shouldn't say that the way they sign is wrong, it's developed naturally amongst them. The older people and the younger people each have their own way of signing. (D33)

D16: The new words come out naturally from the deaf people.

Interviewer: What do you think of those signs?

D16: They're good!

At a practical level, a number of people referred to the richer, more vivid communication afforded by the growing lexicon:

It would be boring to limit the language with just one way of using it. It's good that the language is improving. (D24)

It means that we can tell stories in different ways, have deeper conversations, gossip, you know, all those sorts of things. (D17)

#### **6.10.1. Language development and community growth**

The growing vocabulary was also seen as symptomatic of the physical growth of the school and, by extension, the deaf community. Indeed, the development of the school over the course of its ninety-five year history appeared to be a source of significant pride for deaf people. Stories of its establishment and subsequent development featured prominently in the collective memory of the group, emerging regularly as a topic of conversation, as illustrated in the following fieldnotes:



*In the school handicraft room I was greeted by two deaf men in their fifties who had been sitting chatting together. One of the men, whom I had met on a number of occasions, explained that they had attended school together but had not seen each other in almost twenty years as his friend had moved out of Yangon. Catching up with each other, they started to reminisce about the school, talking about how old it was and discussing the number of Principals there had been over the course of its history. Grinning broadly, he exclaimed, “When Mary Chapman looks down from heaven she will be so glad to see how the school is thriving!”*

As Assmann (1995, p. 130) asserts, these types of shared cultural narratives reinforce group members’ sense of common identity, providing them with an awareness of their ‘unity and peculiarity’. In forging these shared historical connections, it was also common for deaf people to draw parallels between the growth and vitality of the school and that of the large Frangipani tree that stood in the playground and which appeared to serve a totemic function, symbolising the strength and prosperity of the community (see Figure 12). Describing how the tree was planted as a sapling during the early years of the school, people would typically remark on its small size during this bygone time, going on to emphasise the way in which it had subsequently flourished in tandem with the school.

Figure 12: The Frangipani tree in the school compound.



Reflecting on the growing number of students at the school, and the effect of this on the development of the language, one deaf man in his seventies contrasted his time at the school during the 1950s with the current situation:

In my time, there were a lot of wars and invasions. The political situation was very unstable and not too many students came to study here, only a few. But later on many more students started to attend the school. There are more students here now and new signs are emerging. I'm very happy to see that. It's great. All power to them! (D40)

Other participants made similar observations, describing YSL's growing vocabulary as an outcome of increased contact between deaf people in a thriving community:

Communication happens more when lots of deaf people come together. More things are said and in that way the sign language develops. (D20)

They [younger generation] have lots of new signs. The deaf community here is really growing. (D27)

This school has been going for 95 years and lots of traditional Burmese signs have been developed and the language is flourishing. (D29)

With participants embracing lexical variation in this way, YSL could be described as a ‘polynomic’ language in which community members recognise unity in diversity (Jaffe, 1999) (see Literature Review, section 3.9.2). Crucially, with the community emphasising the social construction of the language (as detailed in section 6.7), YSL appeared to be treated primarily as a social and political entity as opposed to being delineated on the basis of linguistic criteria. Consequently, language change and lexical variation were not perceived as a threat to the authenticity of the language, but regarded instead as a legitimate outcome of a dynamic and evolving community. As such, instead of campaigning for linguistic homogeneity, variant signs were typically celebrated as a form of richness.

With YSL seen as intrinsically linked to group identity, the proliferation of new signs also appeared to hold symbolic value for a number of participants. As described in section 6.2.4, people often likened the initial process of learning YSL to a metaphorical opening of their eyes, describing the way in which learning to sign had precipitated a newly found self-confidence and a heightened engagement with the world around them, ultimately leading them to realise their culturally deaf identity. In a similar way, reflecting on the intimate link between YSL and his sense of self, one participant referred to the development of the language in terms of personal growth, describing the additive effect that incorporating new signs into his linguistic repertoire had on his personal identity:

I feel like Yangon Sign Language is part of me. But also, the language keeps developing with more and more new signs, growing and modernising. It’s not just staying at the same level, it’s developing. I have to keep learning more and more

of the new signs. It's really growing! I like to keep learning, and for those new signs to become part of me too. (D5)

### **6.10.2. Language development and deaf ingenuity**

With YSL regarded as a product of deaf people's independence and creativity, another participant described linguistic development as indicative of these community characteristics, evidence of deaf people's linguistic talent and ingenuity:

Deaf people are very smart and so new signs keep emerging! (D3)

Expressing a similar sentiment, a second participant in her mid-fifties pointed to the new signs as confirmation of young deaf people's growing knowledge, symptomatic of the collective progression of the community:

The new signs are a good thing. It shows that [younger deaf people] have a greater knowledge... that their thinking is increasing. It's impressive. It's very good. (D34)

### **6.10.3. Language development and community solidarity**

Acceptance of linguistic diversity may also relate to the importance of unity and mutual support within the community. As mentioned in Chapter 5 (section 5.2) a strong sense of solidarity was apparent in the Yangon deaf community, with people often demonstrating leniency towards others on the basis of their being DEAF-SAME. As Woll and Ladd (2003) observe, deaf communities have been referred to as 'communities of solidarity' within the academic literature, emerging not only in response to shared experiences of deafness and communication, but also as a result of the shared experiences of social exclusion and the mutual support that people consequently offer each other. While the language-as-code perspective inevitably excludes and delegitimises outlying variant forms (see Literature Review, section 3.9.2), a polynomic perspective assumes a more democratic approach, according equal value to all variant linguistic forms (Blackwood, 2011). Crucially, with YSL so closely related to identity, and viewed as a product of

community experiences and interactions, denouncing variant forms would necessarily undermine the associated identities and experiences of deafness, thus breaching the culture of solidarity and acceptance upon which the community is partially founded.

### **6.11. Lexical variation and intergenerational communication**

Despite the ideological acceptance of lexical variation, participants at times described it as presenting a barrier to intergenerational communication. When discussing language change and its impact on communication it was typical for deaf people to describe the community in terms of three broad age groups: ‘younger’ signers were classified as those aged under 35; the ‘middle’ group pertained to those aged 35 – 60; and the ‘older’ group included those aged 60 and over. Notably, those in the older generation appeared to encounter more difficulties in terms of learning and communicating with the new signs. While many participants stressed the importance of interacting with and learning from those younger than themselves, it became apparent that deaf people from the older and younger generations did not socialise together routinely, and despite regular deaf gatherings these were generally attended by people of a similar age. Moreover, while many people in their twenties and early thirties had regular contact with deaf youth through their participation at the weekly Deaf Youth Church and frequent visits to the school, such contact was much more limited for the older generation. Nevertheless, over the course of the fieldwork, it was notable that deaf people of all ages did make occasional visits to the school, typically spending a morning or afternoon in the handicraft room. During these visits they would come into contact with current students as well as the young deaf adults employed in the handicraft room, massage centre and beauty parlour. To this extent, the school appeared to comprise the primary site of intergenerational contact in the community and a number of participants referred to its centrality in facilitating linguistic exchange and the dissemination of new signs. As one deaf man in his mid-fifties explained whilst describing his ability to communicate with signers of different ages:

Sometimes [the different signs] can get confusing! For me I often come to the school so I learn some of the signs from the younger people. So I can use both ways of signing. (D33)

For the majority, however, such school visits were relatively infrequent. Referring to work and family commitments, a number of participants aged forty and over described the impracticality of maintaining regular contact in this way. As one participant explained:

Because I work I don't spend a lot of time with the younger generation. But if I come to this school then later on when I'm at home I think about the new signs I saw. (D27)

Moreover, while nearly all signers in the younger generation expressed their enthusiasm for learning new signs, a minority of deaf people in the middle and older generations were less motivated:

D31: Because of my job I haven't been to the school in a long time, and so when I come here I see how many new signs there are. I feel quiet separate from them. The younger and older people sign very differently.

Interviewer: Are you interested in learning the new signs?

D31: Not really. I catch some of the words sometimes. But I can communicate well using the old signs. I don't really get the new signs, as soon as we start communicating I have to ask them what the signs mean so it's confusing. There are a lot of older deaf people so I just sign with them really.

The middle and older generations' ties to the school often appeared to have faded in the decades since they were students themselves, with other commitments in their lives assuming greater significance. For this reason, it is perhaps unsurprising that many participants described the communication gap between the younger and older generation as being the most pronounced. As one participant in his late twenties described:

I had an experience where I couldn't understand an older person at all! It wasn't that he was bad at signing, he was good. He was like 70 or 80 years old. That age group is really hard to understand. I was like 'I'm so sorry'. You know, I really respect their language. They've always communicated like that and they can understand each other fine. But for me it was hard. (D17)

With communication often strained in this way, it was notable that many members of the younger generation appeared hesitant to enter into conversation with those from the older generation with whom they were not already well acquainted. The following fieldnotes present a typical encounter of this kind:

*Two deaf women in their late 60s, who were visiting the school for an afternoon, sat at a table in the handicraft room chatting together. Looking around the room at what everyone was doing, one of the women got up and went over to a young man who was working at a sewing machine to ask what he was making. Looking up slightly confused and somewhat awkwardly, he quickly returned to his work, ending the interaction.*

## **6.12. Burmese mouthings and intergenerational communication**

When discussing inter-generational linguistic differences, participants also referred to the varying degree to which Burmese mouthings were used by the different age groups: the language used by the older generation was said to involve a great deal of mouthings with only limited manual signing; the middle generation was said to use both manual sign language and mouthings, while the younger generation's signing was reportedly typified by a complete lack of mouthings. It was beyond the scope of this study to conduct any quantitative research into the relative use of mouthings across generations. However, observation of participants appeared to confirm these generalisations. The use of mouthings varied by individual and appeared to be further dependent on a range of contextual factors such as the age of the interlocutor and the topic of conversation. Nevertheless, it was striking that the older generation's signing was characterised by a very high frequency of mouthings while many members of the younger generation would often refrain from mouthing altogether, as illustrated in the following fieldnotes:

*During a conversation about the monsoon rains, a young deaf man from the school massage centre described to a young deaf woman from the handicraft room the impact that the bad weather had had on guests coming to the centre. He signed for roughly one minute while she nodded and listened. As he signed he did not open his mouth at any point; his lips remained firmly closed and still. Not only were there no Burmese mouthings, but he did not appear to use any mouth gestures, although he did incorporate other non-manual features in to his signing.*

These differences in mouthings were typically described by signers of all ages as posing a much greater obstacle to intergenerational communication than the emergence of new signs. As two participants from the younger generation explained:

The older people's signing is different [...] They use their mouths and hands when they're signing. It's very hard to understand. (D8)

Because they use a lot of verbal language I can't really understand. I can't read their lips. The way they sign is also different. Their signs are very short. It's hard to communicate with them. It's also hard to catch what their mouthing as I'm focusing on the signs. (D10)

With this generational difference often impeding comprehension, many participants described the way in which they would typically turn to one of the few deaf people in the community with considerable experience of communicating across age groups, asking them to interpret these conversations. As two participants of different ages reflected:

[their sign language is] different, I have to ask what they're saying. I don't understand. I have to ask [name of deaf teacher] to explain. Then I understand. Sometimes they spell words and they don't use any spoken language so I don't understand it. (D39) (member of the older generation)

If I meet with an older person and I don't understand then I have to ask [name of deaf teacher] to help me translate. Why do we need an interpreter to communicate



across generations?! We're all deaf, we're all the same! [laughing] (D10)  
(member of the younger generation)

Indeed, it was fairly common to observe situations in which this type of mediated intergenerational interaction was required. The following fieldnotes present one such instance:

*Two deaf men in their fifties, who were visiting the school, were eating lunch and chatting together in the handicraft room. Sitting with them was a deaf woman of the same age who was volunteering there. One of the men was discussing the health of his wife, who was ill in hospital. Two younger deaf people in their early twenties also sat in the room, focusing on their work at the sewing machines. As one of them walked past, the older man signed something to her. Not understanding what he had said and with a confused expression, she replied 'wait until you've finished eating to tell me!' before ducking out of the conversation to go and talk to her colleague. Turning to me, the older deaf woman explained that he had asked her to fetch him a clean pillowcase to take to the hospital for his wife. From across the room she caught the attention of the young woman and explained to me, chuckling in good humour, 'she is a bit frightened because she doesn't know what he's saying!' Looking defeated, the young woman responded: 'I don't know what he's saying, he's eating and signing and it's all over the place!' The older volunteer reassured her that once they had finished lunch she would help to translate.*

The differential use of mouthings was typically attributed to changes in language policy at the school; participants traced the older signers' use of mouthings back to their education under oralism, and the younger generation's lack of mouthings to the increasingly bilingual methods employed at the school (see Chapter 2, section 2.11.2). A number of participants were reluctant to be critical of this linguistic difference; with mouthings linked to educational experiences these participants described it as the natural outcome of each group's early experiences in the community, demonstrating acceptance and solidarity as described in section 6.10.3:

Some younger people ask us why the older people use the spoken language, so we tell them that it's because it was taught at the school. The younger people are just signing in the way that they grew up signing. I don't criticise it or say that their signing is bad because they don't use their mouth. It's just the way they sign. They weren't taught to use their mouths when they were growing up. (D33)

I think it's because of changes to the education system. In the old days, around the British time, the school system focused on spoken language. So maybe that's why older people use speech more [...] I'm not saying that the older people are wrong, I'm not saying that. We're equal. They have their own way. (D6)

If [older people] sign too fast then I may not be able to understand. They have their own style. We cannot blame them or think negatively of them. (D15)

Nevertheless, participant observation revealed that the distinct use of mouthings was a source of gentle teasing between some deaf people, as demonstrated in the following fieldnotes:

*During break time in the handicraft room a deaf volunteer in her fifties waved across the room to a young man from the massage centre. Following on from an earlier conversation, she asked him what he thought of the older people's mouthings. In response he mockingly imitated their signing with sloppy looking hand movements and exaggerated mouthings while pulling a face. Everyone in the room laughed, including the deaf teacher in her late forties, who quickly retorted that she found it so confusing to watch the younger people sign.*

### **6.12.1. Burmese mouthings and ideological tension**

Whilst participants in the interview and focus groups often demonstrated tolerance and acceptance in the first instance, as discussions on the topic of mouthings became more in-depth, participants tended to make increasingly critical statements regarding these generational differences. In fact, as the following quotes illustrate, the topic of mouthings appeared to represent an ideological cleavage in the community, a source of tension

between the generations standing in apparent antithesis to the polynomic philosophy of unity-in-diversity described in section 6.10:

For me I don't like the way [the younger generation] signs. I think it's better to use both speech and sign. I don't really agree with the way the younger people sign now. (D36)

The older generation are proud that they can speak, and they are critical that the younger generation do not speak any more. (D19)

When younger and older people meet each other and communicate a lot can happen! Like the younger generation will say, like 'oh, you're using your mouth a lot, it's not clear what you're saying, why don't you use sign language more?' But then the older generation say that the younger generation are using their hands a lot, that it's making us feel dizzy, that it's complicated, like 'why are they doing that?' We criticise each other a lot. (D29)

It's good that we can use our language totally fluently and say whatever we want in it. But actually there's a problem with that, because when we have to talk to the older deaf people they tell us 'you're using a lot of sign language but you're not using any mouthings, what are you talking about?!'. There's a bit of a conflict between the older and younger signers like that. (D5)

Many young deaf people expressed particular resentment at being encouraged by the older generations to use more speech:

Sometimes I meet with the older generation, like during the December party here at the school. When they see us they'll ask 'why aren't you using your mouth?' almost like they're telling us off a little bit. It makes me feel a bit angry. So I told them 'you know, we're deaf people, this is our way of signing, we can communicate just fine!' I think it's wrong to use your mouth. (D8)

I've had experiences where some older people have told me that the younger generation don't learn how to use their mouths, and so they told me 'when you go

out and meet with hearing people in the market or on the bus, because you don't use your mouth it will be difficult to communicate with the outside world', That's my experience of the older generation. I tell them 'I can use writing to communicate with hearing people!' (D2)

An old lady tried to force me to use the verbal language. She said 'it's better to use the verbal language, you have to try and learn to use it'. I told her 'No! I just want to use sign language.' (D1)

Elaborating on this preference, a number of younger generation participants went on to describe the way in which using 'only signs' was more natural. As one deaf man explained during a focus group session:

I don't like using the verbal language. I prefer using sign language, which is my own language. I was born deaf and so I just want to stay natural. So I prefer to just use the sign language [all three participants nod in agreement] (D6)

Such references regarding the naturalness of sign language without mouthings appeared to be rooted primarily in a physiological argument regarding the distinct abilities of both deaf and hearing people. As one deaf woman, aged 23 asserted:

You know, hearing people learn language through listening, and deaf children learn through looking. Mixing the ways is no good. It's not possible. I'm deaf so I should concentrate on what I can do. Each group should focus on what they can do. (D10)

Crucially, as young people regarded mouthings as a hearing person's behaviour, a number of participants considered their use by deaf people to be inappropriate and incongruous with a strong deaf identity. Indeed, with the topic of mouthings increasingly politicised in this way, one deaf man, aged 54, spoke in defence of his generation's signing style while reflecting on the way in which his use of mouthings caused current students at the school to question his hearing status:

I was born deaf. When I went to school we were taught the oral language as well as signs. Now, over time signing has changed so the younger people don't use mouthings. But what about when you need to interact with hearing people, and you don't have time to write out notes? If you sign and speak then they'll understand. Now when I come to the school and meet the kids they ask me 'Are you hearing? Because you're using your mouth...' (D35)

To this extent, participants from the younger generation not only considered mouthings to be perplexing from a communicative perspective, but also expressed a profound sense of confusion relating to the link between language and identity:

The new way of signing amongst deaf people is to keep your mouth closed while signing. I find I often don't understand when the older people are signing and talking at the same time. And I think it makes you look the same as a hearing person. Sometimes we can't tell if they're hearing or deaf. Or sometimes we think 'um, are they crazy?' or 'are they ok?', 'are they hearing or deaf?'. It's hard to tell. (D14)

D2: When you try to pronounce the sentence instead of signing you'll look like a hearing person. It's not really good to look like a hearing person when you're deaf.

D7: For a deaf person they should just use their own natural way...they shouldn't imitate a hearing person.

Further emphasising deaf people's natural aptitude for learning sign language, several participants referred to what they believed to be the relative unintelligibility of the older people's speech, expressing embarrassment at what they considered to be an inferior linguistic style:

At the Christmas party I met an older deaf person and he started talking on his phone, speaking loudly with his voice. So we asked a teacher if he spoke well and she said it wasn't very clear to understand. We had a laugh, but I felt really embarrassed to see it, yeah, I felt ashamed. (D11)

There were three older people in the handicraft room and there was a hearing person too. So when the three older people were communicating and using their voices I asked her, 'what's it like, their speech?'. She said that it wasn't very clear. I felt a bit embarrassed. (D6)

Closely related to these anxieties regarding the quality of deaf people's speech, one participant stressed the importance of disassociating from the common perception of deafness as a deficiency (as detailed in Chapter 1, section 1.6.), explaining his preference for using only manual sign language in order to demonstrate his deaf identity:

*During a lunch break in the handicraft room I asked one deaf man in his late twenties why it was that young deaf people like himself tended not to use mouthings. 'I grew up deaf and using sign language. Also if I use my mouth then people might think I'm dumb, or mentally disabled. It's embarrassing. So I don't use my mouth, I keep it shut and just use my hands'. 'To show that you're deaf?' I asked. 'Yes' he replied, 'that's right'.*

Indeed, to the extent that this purportedly purer form of sign language was seen to index a proud deaf identity and be symbolic of the community's independence and distinct talents, speech training and the use of hearing aids amongst current students at the school represented a controversial topic, provoking some strong reactions from those in the younger generation:

D10: There are some kids here who use hearing aids and learn how to speak. Everyone is different, we can't tell them they're wrong for trying to learn how to speak, everyone has their own way of being.

D3: Personally I don't really like the way they're trying to speak, it's like they can't accept being deaf. It's fine to be deaf!

D10: Yeah, I don't like it either. When I was young I learnt to speak a bit but now that I'm grown up I don't use it so it was just a waste of time as far as I'm concerned

D3: Yeah, what's the point!

D5: I really don't like deaf people learning speech.

*(Focus group discussion)*

The preceding analysis suggests that the decline of mouthings amongst younger signers is not merely the result of changes in the school's language policy, but also the product of evolving ideologies within the community and the younger generation's burgeoning desire to project a strong deaf identity through their linguistic practices. As Woolard (1998, p. 12) observes, language ideologies not only discursively rationalise linguistic features, but may also affect the structure of the language, with structural modifications made in order to reinforce emerging values and beliefs. Ultimately, by rejecting mouthings young deaf signers strive to distance themselves from hearing language and culture, negotiating their identity on their own terms and challenging dominant societal assumptions in which deafness is linked to deficiency.

### **6.13. Unraveling ideological inconsistencies: how life experiences and broader beliefs interact with views on language**

It was noted above that the tension surrounding mouthings is inconsistent with the community's polynomic philosophy. As described in the Literature Review, extending the scope of research beyond an exclusive focus on language issues and attending to a broader framework of community views and beliefs can help to explain apparent contradictions and inconsistencies in research findings. In order to reach a closer understanding of community attitudes towards mouthings, the following section considers the way in which language ideologies interact with participants' wider experiences and beliefs. Attention is given to the reflections of older deaf community members regarding the school language policy and pedagogical approaches employed during their childhood. Crucially, the distinct educational experiences of each generation appear to have shaped their linguistic practices. Moreover, they appear to have influenced each age group's linguistic preferences when communicating with hearing people, as well as their perspectives on the meaning of social participation, deaf equality and citizenship.

In turn, these wider views are shown to affect each generation's attitude towards the use of Burmese mouthings.

### **6.13.1. The older generation's educational experiences**

In contrast to the younger generation's experiences of schooling (as described in Chapter 5), the older generation's education was dominated by intensive speech training, with numerous drills aimed at perfecting their pronunciation and voice projection. During this time sign language was prohibited and a number of elders recalled being punished for using it in the classroom:

If I used sign language I was beaten with the cane. We were only allowed to use spoken language. One of the teachers always told us 'when you use sign language you look like a monkey, aren't you ashamed? You should use spoken language instead. (D38)

One participant, aged 68, described her enduring feelings of shame regarding the use of sign language in public, echoing the residual anxiety reported for many linguistic communities that have experienced punitive school language policies (e.g. see Dauenhauer and Dauenhauer, 1998):

When [my teacher] caught us signing to each other she would tell us 'you look like monkeys'. I felt embarrassed. The teacher said that if we used sign language it should be slow, not moving around too much. She told us that if people saw us moving too much when we signed then they would gossip about us and say that we're crazy. On my way here today I came on the bus with my friend and she was signing using quite big movements and so I told her 'shhh, shhh, stop signing like that'. I felt embarrassed because of it. I said 'shhhh, everyone is looking'. I felt shy. You should sign in a subtle controlled way, not be signing all over the place. I find that embarrassing. (D39)

This type of insecurity stands in stark contrast to the younger generation's defiance regarding their right to use YSL in public (as described in section 6.2.4). Yet despite the older generation's vivid and often troubling recollections of education, they expressed no resentment towards their school experiences. Indeed, many reflected on the benefits of



this system, lamenting the fact that similar methods were not still in use at the school. As the deaf woman quoted above went on to say:

The teachers don't teach [speech] now. They should teach [the students] how to speak in the same way that we used to be taught, looking in the mirror, practicing our pronunciation. That was a really good thing. It's better if deaf people can use both the spoken and sign language well so that they can communicate using either. Having to rely on writing and not being able to speak isn't much use. (D39)

Likewise, recalling the corporal punishment that he sustained during speech training at the school, one deaf man aged 72 thanked his teachers for coaching him in this way:

When we were younger we were taught pronunciation. We had to try over and over again. If we got something wrong we would be caned, so we were a bit scared. We had to pronounce everything correctly. They taught pronunciation a lot. That's how we learned to speak well. So I'm very thankful for that. (D40)

This type of gratitude is consistent with the value of filial piety in Burmese culture and the high degree of respect and devotion that teachers traditionally command, leading to rigid superior-subordinate hierarchies in the classroom (as described in Chapter 2, section 2.4.5). To this extent, a number of participants from the older generation expressed disapproval at the school's recent shift to a more democratic pedagogical approach. Emphasising the importance of discipline in education, their criticisms closely mirror reports from around the world regarding the cultural incompatibility of learner-centred education (see Chapter 5, section 5.5). As one participant exclaimed:

It was very good [when I was at school], the students were well behaved! Not like now! (D41)

A little later on in the interview she elaborated on this point:

Now they're not very disciplined! Before we would sit very still, with arms folded, very well behaved, but now the children aren't so good. They're mucking around a lot. We would sit very still with our arms folded. If the teachers told us

something we would obey them, but now the children don't really listen to the teachers. (D41)

Another participant expressed similar concerns:

[The school] is very different now compared to how it was before. Back then it was quite strict, there were a lot of rules then. The teachers would tell us to sit still and they would deliver the lesson. Now I see that the children are running around, chatting. It's not so disciplined as before. Before we had to sit still. Even going and getting a drink of water – we were not really allowed. We could only play with our friends during the break-time. But now the kids are playing with each other and running around. It's not very strict anymore. (D34)

### **6.13.2. Diverse deaf identities and intergenerational preferences for communicating in hearing society**

During the interviews it was also notable that the older generation appeared somewhat ambivalent towards 'deaf matters'. While the younger and middle generations both tended to talk passionately and at length on issues relating to the deaf community and sign language, older participants showed relatively little interest in these topics. Indeed, when interviewing this group it was common for participants to change the topic of discussion and talk enthusiastically about their work and family lives instead. These distinct priorities draw attention to the way in which experiences of community membership are influenced by an individual's particular life experiences, resulting in heterogeneous ways of being 'deaf'. Similarly, with reference to deaf identities in Japan, Nakamura (2006) describes how a shifting social, political and educational landscape has resulted in diverse understandings of what it means to be deaf.

Although older participants in this research did appear to identify as members of the Yangon deaf community, often socialising with other deaf people, sharing collective memories as well as a sense of solidarity and a mutual language, when compared to the younger generation these aspects of their life did not appear to be as pertinent to their overall sense of self. Indeed, older participants tended to focus as much on their ability to use the spoken language as they did on their use of YSL, taking clear pride in their ability to communicate in this modality. To this extent, when asked about their preferences for

communicating with hearing people, the older generation almost universally stated that they would choose to use speech in such situations:

I'll use speech with a few signs or gestures as well. I don't really use written language. I prefer using lip reading and spoken language. (D33)

I like to speak. I write a little bit, but mostly I use the spoken language. (D29)

I speak with them. If they don't understand straight away then I just repeat what I've said. I don't write. (D38)

Conversely, the vast majority of young participants rejected the use of speech, with most expressing their preference for trying to communicate in sign language or using the written language:

I'll use body language with them, you know. If I go to the cinema I'll point at things and show numbers on a calculator. Or if I go to the market I'll point and sign 'how much' in sign language, you know. I'm proud to show them sign language. Then we can also type numbers out on the calculator and do it like that. (D17)

I'll often go to the market and when they tell me a price I'll use sign language to bargain with them. I don't use my voice, I use sign language with them. I never write either, only signing. When I first meet someone then signing is difficult so I'll try very hard. If they don't understand I'll take a 500 kyat note to show them and then pick up three watercress to show them, for example. (D19)

Well, I would like to use sign language [laughs]. But there are not too many people who know sign language or are interested in it. It's fine to write to communicate. If it's just a few short sentences then it's fine. (D10)

The distinct preferences articulated by each generation were largely confirmed during participant observation, as well as in my own interactions with deaf people of different

ages. Knowing that I wanted to learn their sign language, people from each generation tended to sign in order to communicate with me. Yet in instances when I did not know or understand a sign, members of the older generation would typically resort to mouthing in order to continue the communication; on one such occasion a deaf man of 62 who was renowned for being skilled in the verbal language took the opportunity to instruct me in Burmese pronunciation, going through each phoneme of the word in question and correcting my mistakes. In stark contrast, younger people favoured writing the word and then showing me the sign. Indeed, when there was no pen or paper to hand I found that mouthing the word was typically met with a blank expression, and at times a playful reprimand, such as ‘I can’t hear! Sign!’ or ‘I’m deaf, I don’t understand!’.

### **6.13.3. The older generation’s understanding of language, citizenship and equality**

The distinct language policies and pedagogical approaches employed during the school’s history have clearly influenced each generation’s style of signing, as well as their preferences for communication in wider society. Furthermore, these experiences also appear to have influenced each generation’s understanding of full societal citizenship and the meaning of equality. For the older generation, competence in the spoken language was considered essential for social participation and equality. Thus, in contrast to their enthusiasm for lexical development, which was associated with community development and greater opportunities (as described in section 6.10), the younger generation’s rejection of mouthings and their perceived inability to use spoken Burmese were widely lamented by older deaf signers, who believed this restricted their social mobility and life prospects:

Speaking and signing is a good thing. If you can speak then it means that deaf people can become equal with hearing people. It means hearing people can understand you. It allows you to progress. If you only sign hearing people won’t understand and there will be misunderstandings and problems. There’s no advantage to not using the verbal language. (*D36*)

I feel bad for them! It's better to use the spoken language when you speak with hearing people. (D37)

[The new signs are] a good thing. But actually I feel bad for them [the younger generation]. Before, we didn't sign as much but we could speak. The younger generation don't speak at all. They are good at written language, they study a lot, they can go to university. It's good! They can sign and write, but they cannot use the spoken language so how are they going to communicate with people? It's good they can go to university, but they can't speak [looks sorry...] They have a good education but they don't speak so what will they do with it all?! I finished school at grade 4 but I can speak well. It's different now. It was better before. It's not very good now. (D39)

With facility in spoken Burmese linked to social opportunities in this way, the older generation's devotion to mouthings and oral education appeared to be based on a similar rationale to the community attitudes towards vernacular education seen in Ghana, where many regard mother tongue schooling as a subtle way of keeping communities marginalised (see Mfum-Mensah, 2005). While there was no indication that older deaf people in Yangon regarded the school's change in language policy as an overt attempt to suppress deaf people, there was nevertheless a strong feeling that this policy would impede the younger generation's ability to access social, economic and political life in the country.

#### **6.13.4. The younger generation's understanding of language, citizenship and equality**

The younger generation's conceptualisation of equality, citizenship and meaningful social participation appeared to be fundamentally different from that of their elders, being centered on recognition and respect for their unique language and culture. To this extent, their resistance to mouthings and refusal to communicate in the spoken language can be read not only as a product of educational experiences and an expression of a proud deaf identity, but also as an exercise in awareness raising; when asked what would help to promote equality and greater societal acceptance, many young people pointed to the

importance of generating respect and understanding through dialogue and increased visibility of the language:

I would like to tell [hearing people] that deaf people are not crazy or stupid, that we are just communicating with sign language. And I would also try to communicate with them by using sign language. I think they would then understand a little bit more about us. So, I would use sign language to communicate with them and I think they would change a bit eventually. (D24)

For the people who laugh, or think that deaf people aren't clever I would like to bring an interpreter along and show them that we can communicate just like they can. Then they would understand. (D21)

For someone who's ignorant about sign language, I would like to meet them. I would explain to them who we are, about sign language, show them that we are clever. I think then they would get it and they would be more respectful. (D17)

In a similar way, many also emphasised the need for sign language interpreters on T.V. While some young deaf people described the importance of having equal access to information, most referred primarily to the potential of the media to promote greater deaf awareness (see Chapter 7 for a more in-depth discussion of this):

If deaf sign language was broadcast then everyone could understand. I think that would help educate hearing people about deaf people and our language. While there's no media people will keep discriminating. If we can educate the whole country through media, then people will understand the deaf and sign language and stop looking down on us and discriminating. There's loads of people out there who don't know about deaf people. Yeah...there's loads. (D5)

The media, that's what I want. That would help people to become aware of deaf people, to help them to understand. (D12)

Until sign language is broadcast on TV people will just keep on laughing at us and not understanding us. They'll never have an open mind or learn to communicate with us. If sign is broadcast on TV then hearing people will start to understand about our language and start respecting us. For example, people always think that we are intellectually inferior. So if they learn about deaf people then they can see that our intellectual skills are the same. Then they'll start to change their thinking. (D21)

It should be emphasised that young deaf people were not isolationist in their outlook. Many expressed their desire to participate in wider society, yet they were not willing to sacrifice their language and sense of identity in the process. In this way, younger people emphasised the importance of a dignified form of participation, in which hearing people learn about and come to accept their language and way of being. As one deaf woman, aged 24 reflected:

It would improve deaf people's lives if hearing people understood about us. We could spend time together and work together. For example, in the Sein Gay Har shopping centre in this neighbourhood we can communicate normally among the hearing community because when deaf people buy things [from hearing people] they learn how to communicate [in sign]. We wouldn't misunderstand each other so much. There'd be better communication. They'd treat us like normal people rather than looking down on us and gossiping about us. (D12)

#### **6.14. The lack of language rights discourse in the community**

While issues relating to language, citizenship and equality were key themes in the research, there was a notable absence of language rights discourse in the community; in stark contrast to the growing numbers of linguistic minorities around the world who have adopted a rights framework in their struggle for equality (as described in the Literature Review, section 3.9), only one deaf participant made reference to the need for legislative protections. In order to understand the apparent lack of interest in language rights it is necessary to consider the community's wider socio-cultural and political context. As Cowan et al. (2001) describe, factors at the local, national and transnational level all coalesce to shape community understandings of rights. Similarly, with reference to heritage conservation in Myanmar, Kraak (2015) describes how local engagement with

rights is influenced by historical and geographical context. The following discussion briefly considers a number of socio-political and cultural factors at the national and local level that are likely to impede the deaf community's adoption of a rights-based approach to achieving linguistic equality. A number of these echo the practical obstacles to obtaining language rights described in the Literature Review (section 3.9.1). Attention is then given to the alternative model of equality envisioned by young deaf people, and the way in which it appears to mirror their experiences of linguistic and cultural citizenship in the school (as described in Chapter 5).

#### **6.14.1. Factors at the national and local level**

With Myanmar's record of serious human rights abuses and its long-standing opposition to linguistic diversity it is unlikely that the Yangon deaf community would consider a rights-based approach to language as a viable means of achieving equality. As described in Chapter 2, Myanmar has a particularly troubling history of human rights abuses, and there has been little indication of improvement since the democratic election of November 2015. Additionally, Kraak (2015) notes that the absence of a strong judiciary means that Myanmar currently lacks the capacity to legally enforce rights. Consequently, public engagement with the concept remains tentative (Kraak, 2015). As the UN Human Rights Council report (2016, p. 4) on Myanmar states:

Endemic corruption and limited capacity and will to conduct effective investigations and prosecutions add to a general lack of public trust in the administration of justice

The country's heavily restricted press (described in Chapter 2) may also inhibit the public's awareness of rights. Following the military coup in 1962 Myanmar's media came under state control, with all publications and broadcasts submitted to a strict censorship process. Towards the end of the 1980s a number of exile-run media groups developed, including Democratic Voice of Burma, Mizzima and the Irrawaddy. Various ethnic newsletters also emerged during this time, often dedicated to reporting human rights abuses. These outlets represented the only sources of uncensored political



information and helped to raise awareness of rights abuses both internationally and within Myanmar (Brooten, 2014). It is likely that the media will play a much more prominent role in facilitating greater public awareness on these topics in the future; in 2012 censorship laws were relaxed as part of the national reform process, allowing the press to engage in limited discussion on concepts such as rights and political freedom (Lall and Hla Hla Win, 2012). It should be noted, however, that not all sectors of Myanmar society enjoy equal access to the media; as the findings from this thesis demonstrate, deaf people's access to broadcast media is highly constrained. Moreover, with varying levels of literacy in the deaf community, many individuals are also limited in their ability to follow print media.

The lack of language rights discourse in the Yangon deaf community may also be attributable to the politically sensitive nature of language in Myanmar and the country's long history of assimilationist language policy and suppressing linguistic diversity (see Chapter 2). This legacy is unlikely to inspire confidence amongst minorities looking to protect their languages. In particular, the ongoing government project to standardise Yangon and Mandalay sign language makes clear that future policy will not be concerned with promoting and developing local sign languages.

#### **6.14.2. The role of the school in generating alternative visions of equality**

My findings in section 6.13. of this chapter show how, in lieu of language rights, young deaf people conceptualised an alternative path to equality. Specifically, participants tended to regard dialogue, in its broadest sense, to be the clearest route to equality and meaningful social participation; whether through increasing the visibility of their language in the public sphere, or entering into direct discussion on matters relating to sign language and deaf culture, participants emphasised the importance of challenging dominant perceptions of deafness and stimulating new social understandings. Notably, this preference for public dialogue and deliberation on matters of language and culture closely mirrors the linguistic and cultural citizenship that participants experienced at the Mary Chapman School (as described in Chapter 5). In this way, the findings draw

attention to the role that community schools can play in promoting local models of participation, equality and empowerment. As Rocco (2000, p. 234) states, local practices of political inclusion that occur within civil society may result in ‘the development of new forms of rights-claims and modes of citizenship’.

Moreover, this grassroots model of equality circumvents some of the pitfalls associated with the rights paradigm. Most notably, as a transformative approach to equality aimed at restructuring hegemonic and marginalising assumptions, deaf people’s preference for deliberation and negotiation does not require ideological compromise or risk upsetting group dynamics. As described in the Literature Review, the language rights paradigm demands acquiescence to dominant classifications of language. Yet, this could be problematic for the Yangon deaf community; as YSL evolves, expands, and ultimately changes with each new intake of Mary Chapman students, the language does not conform to dominant essentialist definitions of language. Moreover, as described in section 6.10, this linguistic variation is widely embraced by the deaf community, with lexical variation seen as symbolic of a flourishing community, and with acceptance of linguistic diversity an important aspect of maintaining group solidarity. In contrast to the rights framework, which obliges communities to disregard heterogeneous and diverse linguistic practices, young deaf people’s alternative model of equality does not risk upsetting community dynamics in this way. Indeed, with its deliberative premise centred on deaf people being able to define YSL and its relation to group identity on their own terms, their alternative approach to achieving equality can easily accommodate the linguistic variation and change that characterises YSL.

### **6.15. Chapter discussion**

This chapter has explored unofficial LPP within the Yangon deaf community, paying particular attention to the way in which language ideologies and linguistic practices interact with various life experiences and philosophies to form an unofficial, yet powerful, de facto policy regarding the type of language that is acceptable for community use.

The chapter has highlighted the mutually constitutive relationship that exists between language ideologies and the social world, as described in the Literature Review (section 3.2). Language ideologies do not simply comprise a set of beliefs that reflect the social world, but in fact sculpt social reality. Within the Yangon deaf community, language ideologies serve a clear political function, as participants discursively carve out various social and cultural identities which are then mobilised in order to protect the integrity of their language, maintain group autonomy and promote solidarity and the vitality of both the language and community. By illustrating these processes, the chapter has demonstrated some of the ways in which the Yangon deaf community constructs its cultural-linguistic identity. As noted in section 6.3, while participants' accounts of deaf identity and community membership often bear close resemblance to accounts in the Deaf Studies literature, it should not be assumed that deaf cultural life and deaf identity in Yangon corresponds exactly to that of other deaf communities. This chapter has illustrated how the construction of deafness in Yangon is fundamentally linked to local community experiences.

While attitudes towards foreign borrowings and lexical development were largely uniform, there was not always ideological harmony within the community and views on mouthings represented a point of contention. Rather than viewing these divergent ideologies as somehow anomalous, analysis revealed them to be the product of distinct views on social participation and equality, which in turn were closely related to participants' unique life histories and diverse experiences of deaf community membership. Accordingly, the chapter has drawn attention to multiple experiences of deafness within the community, supporting Brandon and Miller's (2002) assertion that being deaf may not always be the most salient aspect of one's social identity (see section 6.3). In this way, the chapter has highlighted the importance of a comprehensive theoretical approach which recognises that language issues are embedded within a wider socio-political context and accounts for the 'complex set of social, political, economic, religious, demographic, educational and cultural factors that make up the full ecology of human life' (Spolsky, 2004, p. ix).

Finally, the chapter has demonstrated how, in lieu of language rights, young deaf people in Yangon appeared to draw on local community experiences of linguistic and cultural participation at the Mary Chapman School in order to formulate an alternative model of equality and citizenship. In this way, the chapter has drawn attention to the key role that schools can play in promoting local models of equality.

## **Chapter 7: Community Responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project**

### **7.1. Introduction**

This chapter explores participants' attitudes towards the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project. In recognition of the central role that schools play in the implementation of official LPP, the first section examines the way in which educators at the Mary Chapman School perceive the standardised sign language. While teachers' responses to standardisation were generally characterised by disinterest, this appeared to be motivated by their pedagogical philosophy as opposed to a lack of concern with community matters.

Attention is then turned to deaf people's responses to standardisation. Community views on the standardised language were complex and diverse, as participants negotiated, resisted and yet at times accepted the standardised sign language. The chapter illustrates the way in which standardisation has opened up 'ideological and implementational spaces' (Hornberger, 2005), in which members of the younger generation appeared to appropriate the standardised language for their own agenda. For these participants the standardisation project represents a useful expedient for achieving linguistic citizenship and fostering respect for their own language and culture. While this approach to obtaining social equality involves compromise, participants worked to safeguard their unique identity and the continued vitality of YSL by articulating their own unofficial policy regarding community use of the standardised language.

Throughout the chapter participants' responses to standardisation are discussed in relation to the wider framework of values, ideologies and aspirations that operated in the community, as described in the previous two chapters. In this way the chapter further highlights the benefits of an ethnographic approach to research, one which accounts for

the intricacies of community life in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of local responses to official, top-down LPP.

## **7.2. Teachers' perceptions of language standardisation**

As described in Chapter 5, the Myanmar Social Welfare Department has requested that teachers at the Mary Chapman School start using Myanmar Standard Sign Language. However, the school's NGO status grants it freedom to resist such government intervention. During informal conversations both the School Principal and the Deputy Head expressed their unwillingness to acquiesce to these appeals, emphasising their preference for YSL<sup>44</sup>. On one occasion the School Principal expressed concerns that adopting the standardised language could undermine communication in the classroom, further complicating an already complex linguistic situation (see Chapter 5, section 5.2 for linguistic challenges in the classroom).

In contrast to the stance of the school leaders, individual teachers' perceptions of language standardisation were less categorical; only two interviewees stated that they used the standard signs in the classroom, while the majority of teachers appeared indifferent to the standardisation project and its resulting signs. Although several teachers acknowledged the potential benefits of a common national language, often pointing to inter-regional communication as an example, there was nevertheless a general scepticism regarding the necessity and practicality of introducing another sign language into the country:

We already have a language, so what are we going to do? Delete it? Replace it all? We have already produced a lot of students. For the new students it is possible to use this sign language. But we've been using Mary Chapman Sign Language for many years. So, the older generation might not accept [the standardised sign language], they might not want to use it, or learn over again.  
(T10)

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<sup>44</sup> It was unclear whether this preference had been communicated to teachers.

No country has a standardised sign language. Like, Thailand has 8 different sign languages. The Philippines have many different schools each with its own sign language. Here we have one school in Kalay, one here [Yangon] and one in Mandalay. Now there is a new school that has opened in Yangon. One thing is that this book could be used like a common language. But for the students and the deaf children, they just use whatever they are interested in, whatever they want to use. For the kids here who have finished school, they just want to use the sign language from here. (T11)

Expressing similar concerns, another teacher described a general lack of interest in the standard signs:

T5: To be honest I've just looked through a little bit of this [standardised sign language] book. I haven't really read it all.

Interviewer: What do you think of the idea of having one standard sign language?

T5: It's for TV. But people might not know everything in this book. For example, people from Yangon may only know the Yangon signs, and people from Mandalay may only use their own signs. So if someone has really studied all the signs in the book then they will understand it. But people, they're just used to their own signs.

Interviewer: So, do you ever notice people using the signs?

T5: I don't really see people using the signs from this book. There may be some, but for me, I don't really see many people using them.

Teachers' apathy and the limited uptake of standard signs may be partially attributable to insufficient communication from official policy makers. As Ali et al. (2011) assert, a lack of clarity regarding the aims of official LPP can lead to diverse policy interpretations at the local level, undermining effective implementation. Moreover, Yi (cited in Choi, 2015) describes how limited contact with official policy makers can provoke negative attitudes and discontent amongst teachers. One teacher expressed her disillusionment with the project, referring to the government and JICA's failure to inform teachers of the purpose of standardisation:

For this school, we just use our own signs. I mean, who is this book for? For which area? It's like a new sign language for Yangon, new for Mandalay. They never really told us exactly what it's about. If they want to use it on TV, well people from Yangon and people from Mandalay already have their own signs [...] I haven't really looked through it, and I'm not even sure if I have a copy of it or not. So, I don't really care much for it. (T6)

While the teachers quoted above were relatively forthright in their views on standardisation, many did not enter into such candid discussion. To this extent, it was notable that teachers tended not to express their own personal opinions during discussion, adopting a more objective and detached stance. In many cases interviewees appeared to have little to say on the topic at all. It is possible that not all participants felt comfortable expressing their views on a government run project. Yet, in many cases, it appeared that teachers' disinterest was a product of their pedagogical philosophy and attitudes towards sign language. As described in Chapter 5, teachers' willingness to learn from deaf people regarding sign language and deaf culture comprised a significant aspect of their professional identity. Moreover, the importance of deaf control over the development of YSL was often emphasised, as teachers acknowledged the linguistic and cultural expertise of their students and appreciated community ownership of the language (see Chapter 5, section 5.3). In this way, teachers' apparent lack of investment in language standardisation may reflect their belief that deaf people, as guardians of the language, possess the ultimate right to make decisions regarding the language.

When teachers were asked whether they favoured using the standardised sign language, several contended that their preferences were inconsequential, explaining that their classroom language practices were dependent on the preferences of their students:

T4: For the new students it's ok to teach them [the standardised sign language]. But for the kids who are older, the kids that we're teaching now, they might not want to use it. Because they already have YSL. It also depends on the teacher, some teachers want to use this book and some teachers don't want to use it. So it also depends on the teacher.



Interviewer: And, do you want to use the signs from this [standardised sign language] book?

T4: As a teacher I can't use the language that I want to use. I have to use what the children want.

For us we have to use the signs that the kids use. That's what we have to use. (T7)

For me I don't really use the signs in this book. There are some other teachers who may use this book, but for me I don't. I just use the signs that are used by the students. I just use the signs that they use. (T3)

Indeed, in the early stages of the research I initiated an informal conversation with a retired teacher, at one point expressing an interest in learning more about the standardisation project. In response, I was advised to talk directly to deaf people, as it was 'their language'. The remainder of this chapter considers deaf peoples' responses to language standardisation.

### **7.3. Deaf people's ambivalence towards standardisation**

While deaf people tended to be more expansive than teachers when discussing standardisation, community views were nevertheless characterised by ambivalence and ambiguity. Notably, individuals from the younger generation (aged 18-35) often oscillated between tentative acceptance and total rejection of language standardisation depending on which aspect of the project was being considered (this is discussed further in the second half of the chapter). In contrast, members of the middle and older generations took a more resolute stance, describing their resistance to the standardised sign language, emphasising its lack of relevance to their lives and their disinterest in learning the new signs:

When I saw [the standardised sign language book] I just felt that I'm not interested. It's so different. I feel like this is just something that the government is doing. (D34)

I don't think it's very good. I just want to continue using my sign language. Now that we have the standardised sign language people are asking 'Why was it created? We have Yangon Sign language!' (D25)

I just use my sign language! Not those signs. I did learn the signs from the book before, but I can't really just change my signs you know! (D33)

While the majority of participants in the middle and older generations were overtly opposed to standardisation, it was notable that some older participants were evasive when asked about their views:

Interviewer: What do you think of combining Yangon and Mandalay signs to make a standard sign language?

I'm not sure. I don't really want to say if it's good or bad. (D40)

As for the government creating this [standardised sign language] book, it's fine. As they wish. I don't have anything bad to say about it. As they wish. I don't know much about it. (D39)

It is possible that some participants were wary of passing judgment on a government initiative. However, this reticence may in fact be indicative of the older generation's relative apathy towards sign language and their lesser involvement in deaf community matters (as described in Chapter 6, section 6.13.2). Moreover, it should be noted that the older generation's preference for using Burmese mouthings is not accommodated in the standardised sign language. Indeed, a section at the front of the handbook instructs learners on the importance of omitting mouthings from their signing (see Chapter 2, section 2.13). As the following extract from my fieldnotes demonstrate, training sign language interpreters in this 'pure' form of sign language, with no influence from spoken Burmese, was a central concern for one deaf woman employed by JICA:

*In a bright and airy classroom in JICA's interpreter training facility, around 15 young women sat in a loose semi circle, taking turns to come to the front of the class and sign a short narrative to the group. Their sign language instructor, a deaf man of around forty years of age sat to the side of the class, observing. Another deaf instructor, who was also centrally involved in the standardisation project, sat next to me describing the way in which many students struggled to sign without using Burmese mouthings. As we continued to observe the class she discretely pointed out instances in which the students mouthed Burmese words alongside their signing, remarking on the need to drill them in 'pure deaf sign language grammar'.*

Signing without mouthing corresponds to the linguistic preferences and language ideologies of deaf people in the younger generation. Yet, as shown in the previous chapter (section 6.13), members of the older generation tended to pride themselves on their ability to use the spoken language, with Burmese mouthings forming a central aspect of their linguistic identity and regarded as key to social participation and equality. One deaf man, aged 54, described his dissatisfaction with the way in which the standardised sign language appeared to privilege the younger generation's signing style:

I don't like it very much, because it only uses sign language. With this book there's no mouthings included, it focuses mainly on the language used by the younger generation...It would be better if the book could include both ways of signing. They shouldn't discriminate. They should promote both ways. (D35)

The concerns articulated by this participant offer further insight into the middle and older generations' dissatisfaction with the standardised language, and demonstrate the potential for language standardisation to disrupt community dynamics, elevating certain linguistic varieties and their users while delegitimising and disenfranchising others (see Literature Review, section 3.6.2). As Tulloch (2008, p. 104) states, standardisation 'can be divisive despite unifying intentions'.

One feature of the standardised sign language that participants of all ages considered problematic was the high proportion of Mandalay signs that they considered were contained within it, and the relative paucity of Yangon signs<sup>45</sup>. As one deaf man asserted, the low proportion of YSL had resulted in a general lack of interest within the Yangon deaf community:

That [standardised sign language] book contains only a very few Yangon signs, and many Mandalay signs. That's why a lot of deaf people don't like it. If there was more YSL then people might like it more. (D27)

Indeed, recalling the first time that they had seen the standardised language, many participants described the surprise and disappointment they felt upon noting this disparity:

When the Para-Games<sup>46</sup> were happening some of us from Yangon were watching it on the news. When they were announcing who had won and stuff like that there was a sign language interpreter, and so we all gathered round to watch, but we couldn't understand it so we all went off again. You know! We heard that there was a sign language interpreter using the standardised sign language, so we all gathered round kind of excited to watch it on the screen. But when we saw it, well, we were like 'oh, it's just like Mandalay signing', and so we left. (D5)

D10: I had a look through that [standardised sign language] book, but there were hardly any Yangon signs and loads of Mandalay signs. I don't know why. When I got a copy of it I didn't think much of it, there's only a very tiny bit of YSL in there.

Interviewer: Do you use any of the signs?

D10: No [laughing].

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<sup>45</sup> The exact proportion of Yangon and Mandalay signs contained in the standardised sign language handbook are presented in Chapter 2, section 2.13. However, in cases where there is no standard sign in the book sign language instructors must decide which sign to teach to interpreters. Consequently, it is unclear what percentage of Mandalay and Yangon signs a trained interpreter would use.

<sup>46</sup> The 2014 ASEAN Para Games took place in Myanmar's capital city, Naypyidaw.

The bias towards Mandalay signs was generally attributed to the fact that the deaf School in Mandalay is state run, leading the Myanmar government and JICA to give precedence to the signs used there. As one participant explained:

They said it was Myanmar Standard Sign Language. I was expecting to see more Yangon signs, but when I looked through the book it was all different and there weren't really any. It was mostly Mandalay signs. It's because JICA was more connected to Mandalay when they made it. So, people from Yangon don't feel much connection to it. I think it's because the Mandalay school is a government school, whereas Mary Chapman is private. So I think that's why the government has had more to do with them. (D14)

When elaborating on their indifference towards the standardised language, a number of participants made reference to the difficulty they had 'connecting' to the Mandalay signs included within it:

When I look in the book and see the Yangon signs then I really connect to it, but when I look at the Mandalay signs it's hard to feel a connection to them. (D3)

In this book the Yangon deaf people are only really going to feel a connection to the Yangon signs. The same for Mandalay, they'll only really connect to the Mandalay signs. (D8)

These statements echo the way in which participants responded to foreign borrowings, as they emphasised the cultural incongruity of such signs and their consequent resistance to using them (see Chapter 6, section 6.5). To this extent, community disillusion with the standardised language and its disproportionate inclusion of Mandalay signs may not pertain solely to the perceived injustice of this situation and participants' sense of linguistic discrimination; additional ideological anxieties may also be relevant, with the inclusion of Mandalay signs rendering the standardised language culturally distant and thus unsuitable for community use. As noted in section 6.5 of the previous chapter, the use of Mandalay signs in Yangon was not considered to be appropriate linguistic behaviour, with a number of participants recounting the negative feedback that they had

encountered upon experimenting with the standardised sign language in their everyday communication.

#### **7.4. Critiquing the process of standardisation**

When discussing the perceived bias towards Mandalay signs a number of participants referred to the need for a more egalitarian approach to standardisation. While an equal number of deaf people from Yangon and Mandalay were involved in the project (see Chapter 2, section 2.13) this measure was considered insufficient by participants in one focus group, who referred to the need for a more far-reaching and inclusive collaboration between the two deaf communities:

Interviewer: Do you think it's important to have a standard language?

D5: I think it's a good thing. But with this [standardised sign language] book, it would be better if a lot of deaf people could get together and discuss it all first. People from Yangon say that there are more signs from Mandalay included in this book with really only a few Yangon signs. So they don't understand it.

D10: It's meant to be the standardised language, but there are hardly any Yangon signs and loads of Mandalay signs. I was looking through and there are really loads. It's not really a true mix of Yangon and Mandalay.

D5: It would be better if lots of people from both cities could get together and discuss it to decide what would be a beautiful way to express the sign

D10: When I saw that there were very few Yangon signs in the book...that's why I decided I wasn't interested in it. Well, I just let it go, you know, let it be. It would be better if after they published the book they could show it to deaf people, get some feedback and then edit it.

D3: It would be better if a lot of deaf people from both cities could get together and decide on the signs.

*(Focus group discussion)*

Similarly, a participant in another focus group described the need for greater inter-community involvement, with sustained contact between the two cities:

What would be better is if deaf people from Yangon and Mandalay could meet up with each other regularly and then maybe some signs would develop. This book is quite difficult to learn from, and most people aren't interested in it. It's based on just a few deaf people meeting up. It would be better if the majority of deaf people could meet and make decisions together. That would be better. (D8)

For these participants the concept of a standardised sign language did not appear to be inherently problematic. Rather, it was the process of arriving at this standardised form that was contentious. It is notable that participants also placed significant emphasis on the way in which YSL had developed, with authentic status ascribed to linguistic forms that were culturally relevant, having emerged naturally as a result of deaf interactions (see previous chapter, section 6.7). With language, culture and community regarded as inextricably intertwined, it is perhaps unsurprising that these participants considered a collective approach to standardisation, involving deaf interaction at the national level, to be a pre-requisite for developing a relatable and authentic national standard sign language.

These calls for increased contact between the Yangon and Mandalay deaf communities would appear, in the first instance, to complement the nationalistic goals that have traditionally inspired official language standardisation. However, as described in Chapter 2, the Myanmar government vetoed JICA's suggestion that a national deaf organisation should be established as part of the standardisation project. While it was beyond the scope of this project to ascertain the reasoning behind the government's decision, Mori (2011) suggests that attempts to prohibit the creation of a national deaf organisation are indicative of the government's desire to maintain its control over the project and, arguably, the deaf population in general. As Albaugh (2014) notes, authoritarian leaders who are wary of potential political mobilisation within the populace may not look favourably on the uniting of minority groups.

## 7.7. Concerns about authenticity

During the interviews a number of deaf people referred directly to the inauthenticity of the standardised sign language, particularly when discussing its use in the city's newly opened deaf school in the Tamwe Township (see Chapter 2, section 2.9). Participants reiterated the importance of deaf ownership of sign language, contrasting the natural development and transmission of YSL with that of the standardised language. To this extent one participant referred to JICA's involvement in the project as problematic, expressing further concern at the formal way in which the language would be taught to students at the new deaf school:

D34: The sign language at this school came out naturally from deaf people, but with the standardised sign language, it's with the assistance of Japan, so that's a problem.

Interviewer: So, do you mean that it's better to have a sign language that develops naturally from the deaf people?

D34: That's right, here [YSL] developed on its own, it's good. But the standardised sign language is being taught [to the students at the new deaf school]. Here it wasn't taught like that at all! It developed naturally! I really like YSL, but I'm not into the standardised sign language.

Similarly, another participant was concerned that students at the new school would learn the standardised sign language from teachers rather than their deaf peers, emphasising the inadequacy of this method and contrasting it to his own experiences of learning YSL:

In that [new] school the kids will just be taught by the teachers, that's how they will learn the language [...] For them the sign language is just coming from the teacher, so it's unlikely to have a very deep meaning. (D8)

Later in the interview he elaborated on this point:

For us, we learnt our language naturally, through experience and communication. For them [the students at the new deaf school] they are just learning the signs from the book. I think it's a bit like memorising, so I think they may end up



forgetting the signs that they learn. For now maybe they'll be ok, but as they have to learn more words...I don't know, it just comes from the book, it's not very natural. (D8)

Notably, for a number of participants, the use of the standardised sign language in the new school was regarded as potentially divisive, hindering communication between students of the two schools:

The sign language from this school is different to the sign language in the new school. Even though we're all in the same city, when the kids grow up and want to communicate with each other they won't be able to. It will be hard for us to have a deep connection with each other. (D8)

Because the two languages are very different it means that communication will be hard [between students from each school]. It used to be just one language here, YSL, which has been very successful. But now there are two languages there will be some problems. (D34)

It was common for participants to describe how the standardised sign language had, in fact, created a third sign language in the country, further fragmenting Myanmar's linguistic and cultural landscape. In this way, the outcome of the project to date stands in contrast to its goal of unification and homogenisation.

## **7.6. Communicating with Mandalay signers**

Mutual comprehension between regions is often cited as a significant advantage of language standardisation (see Tulloch, 2008), yet only a very few participants stated that they would use the standardised sign language for the purposes of inter-regional communication. As noted in Chapter 2, contact between members of the Yangon and Mandalay deaf communities is relatively infrequent, although many participants did recall occasions when they had met with deaf signers from Mandalay. Participants often described the challenges of communicating across languages, along with the range of strategies they had employed to facilitate understanding. These included written notes, pictures and body gestures. When asked what language they would choose to use when

meeting a deaf person from Mandalay, a small number of participants claimed that they would continue to use YSL. Of those who expressed a willingness to alter their linguistic practices, however, the majority stated a preference for using Mandalay Sign Language, as opposed to relying on the standardised language:

When I meet with people from Mandalay I communicate with them by observing [their language], exchanging signs and asking them about their sign language. I don't use the sign language from this [standardised sign language] book. (D18)

We kind of exchange our sign languages to communicate. So when the people from Mandalay come here they change their signs a little bit and when we go to Mandalay we change our sign language a little bit. (D16)

I've met with deaf people from Mandalay before. I went to one person's house and I tried to study their sign language [...] when I first communicated with them, at first I had to say 'please sign slowly', but then later on I got used to the sign language and it got much easier. They learned Yangon Sign Language as well. So, they tried to learn Yangon Sign Language, and I tried to learn Mandalay Sign Language. Kind of like an exchange, learning together. (D11)

While this was a very gradual process, participants reported that with perseverance they were able to reach a sufficient level of competence for every day communication. As one person described:

Let's say I go into a group of Mandalay signers... For me, I am not used to using Mandalay Sign Language. But I'll start studying it and after a few days I will be able to communicate with them more and more. Now, it's not as fully as I can communicate with Yangon Sign Language. But I can communicate. (D23)

Although the existence of two distinct sign languages presented a clear barrier to inter-community communication, deaf people were largely accepting of this linguistic diversity (see also Chapter 6, section 6.5 on attitudes towards regional variation). As the following two participants asserted:

It's fine for there to be different languages. It's just a bit difficult to communicate when we meet. (D10)

The differences are fine. It's good that people have their own language in the different regions. (D12)

Casting linguistic diversity as a valuable resource, one participant enthusiastically described the personal enrichment to be gained from learning Mandalay Sign Language. To this extent, the prospect of replacing regional languages with a single standard sign language was seen as highly undesirable:

I want to learn all the sign languages in the country. You know, Mandalay has a sign language, Yangon has a sign language. I want to learn both. I don't think there should be only one [language] in the future. No. I want to study all three of them, Myanmar, Mandalay and Yangon. For example, if you say to a deaf person that they have to just study that one language in the future then they are not going to enrich their knowledge or develop their levels of understanding. They're not going to learn as much, they'll be limited. I enjoy all the languages. I don't want to just learn the standardised language. (D5)

Another participant reflected on the benefits of learning to communicate with deaf people from Mandalay:

I try to use Yangon Sign Language less [when communicating with deaf people from Mandalay]. I put it aside and use more Mandalay Sign Language. Although it's hard to do that! I use both really. When we communicate I learn new things that I didn't know before, new signs. (D21)

With regional variation regarded as the product of each group's distinct experiences and worldviews (see Chapter 6), it is perhaps unsurprising that participants were appreciative of linguistic diversity. Indeed, to the extent that language and identity were seen as intimately related, a number of participants described using Mandalay Sign Language as a way of demonstrating their respect for the community's unique language and culture.

As one participant explained, when asked about his preferences for communicating with Mandalay signers:

I use Mandalay Sign Language because I respect their culture. (D28)

Another participant stated that, while the standardised sign language represented a convenient tool for communication, his preference was to communicate in Mandalay Sign Language when visiting deaf people in the region:

D17: I already know some of their signs, so if they don't know the Yangon signs then I use the Mandalay signs that I know. I'm happy to be able to communicate with them in their language and I also encourage them to learn Yangon Sign Language. Because it can be a bit tricky for Yangon and Mandalay deaf people to communicate there's a standardised sign language book, so if someone from Mandalay or another part of Burma has studied it then we could communicate using the signs in that book too.

Interviewer: So if you meet a deaf person from Mandalay would you prefer to use the standardised sign language?

D17: I'd only use a few of the standardised signs, more Mandalay signs. The Mandalay people grew up using Mandalay sign language, it's their own language so I want to learn it and I'd prefer to use that when I meet them.

As he and another participant explained, learning Mandalay Sign Language was considered to be an important gesture of respect:

When a person from Mandalay comes here they should show respect and learn our language, and when Yangon people go to Mandalay they should learn Mandalay sign language [...] deaf people have to show respect for each other's languages. Share their languages with each other and teach each other. (D17)

I respect their sign language so I asked them to teach it to me so that I could understand. I respect Mandalay sign language and I respect Yangon sign language. (D21)

Indeed, while the Yangon and Mandalay deaf communities were regarded as two completely distinct social groups, participants would at times refer to a sense of solidarity with deaf people from Mandalay. One participant described learning Mandalay Sign Language as an expression of this unity:

I know Yangon Sign Language and I'd like to learn Mandalay Sign Language as well. Because I think it's good to know both sign languages, we're equal, you know. Because we're all the same, deaf people. (D6)

### **7.7. Young deaf people's reflections on the benefits of learning the standardised sign language**

Although the standardised language itself was widely criticised by the Yangon deaf community and was rejected as a potential lingua franca, some aspects of the standardisation project were referred to favourably by members of the younger generation. Participants from this age group often emphasised the practical importance of learning the standard signs; it was also common for young deaf workers at the Mary Chapman School to communicate in the standardised language when greeting hearing visitors and to present them with copies of the standardised sign language handbook. In order to understand the logic behind these seemingly inconsistent attitudes and behaviours, the remainder of this chapter explores the way in which participants' responses to language standardisation were motivated by a complex web of diverse and sometimes competing needs, beliefs, values and aspirations.

Crucially, members of the younger generation envisaged various outcomes from language standardisation, regarding it not only as a potential threat to the vitality of YSL, but also viewing it as an opportunity for furthering some of the group's interests and agendas. In order to optimise the benefits of standardisation whilst safeguarding the vitality of YSL, young deaf people described their own unofficial language policy, delineating the domains in which the standardised language could, and could not, be accepted for use. To the extent that participants negotiated these competing agendas and potential outcomes,

the government's plans for standardisation appears to have opened up what Hornberger (2005) refers to as 'ideological and implementational spaces' within the community.

As the standardised sign language is scheduled to be used in the media (see Chapter 2, section 2.13), many participants described the importance of acquiring competency in the language in order to gain access to current affairs and other information that had previously been unavailable to them:

If the standardised sign language improves in the future it will be used more in the media [...] If a person from Yangon is watching TV they might not understand it, so they will need to study the standardised language [...] If there were an interpreter to translate all the information in the news then it would really benefit us. Right now we don't have that kind of programme so we can't understand the news. Even though I ask my parents, they can't explain properly. (D17)

If I'm given the [standardised sign language] book but I just reject it and don't study it at all... you know, if I think it's best to only use my own Yangon Sign Language, then when there are interpreters broadcast on TV or the news I'm not going to understand. I won't know anything. So I'll study the signs in this book but I'll also keep using my own language and have both. (D7)

In the media if they're talking about a natural disaster, for example, you will have to know the standardised sign language so that you will be able to get that information. (D19)

Indeed, one deaf participant described his long-term involvement in the standardisation project despite the fact that he placed significant value on linguistic diversity and was fundamentally opposed to the concept of standardisation. When asked about his decision to work in this capacity he responded pragmatically, pointing to the barriers facing deaf people in their daily lives and emphasising Myanmar's need for interpreters:

Interviewer: What made you decided to stay working on the project?

D28: Because at the moment if deaf people want to watch the news or go to university there are no interpreters, so it's very difficult. The aim of the [standardised sign language] book is to train and provide interpreters.

In addition to granting deaf people access to information and new modes of social participation, members of the younger generation also valued the standardised sign language for its potential to raise deaf awareness. As noted in the previous chapter (section 6.13.4), participants frequently commented on the importance of media visibility when reflecting on the most effective ways to counter negative societal attitudes. As Moring (2007) and Ladd (2007) note, the cultural capital of television can raise the prestige of minority languages, creating visibility and awareness amongst the majority. In this way, one participant considered the various ways in which hearing people might respond to seeing the standardised language broadcast on television, reflecting on its potential for generating curiosity about deaf people and their language:

I think they might be a bit perplexed. Maybe they'd have a lot of questions about it... They might not know what it means. Or maybe they'll realise that it's for deaf people. And then in the future perhaps they'll become interested in learning sign language, come to the deaf school and want to learn more. (D17)

Noting that interpreted programmes had already occasionally been aired on TV, a number of people described how this appeared to have generated a new sense of appreciation for deaf people and their language. As one participant stated:

After seeing interpreters on TV more students started to attend the school, because people became aware that deaf people could learn. It gave them some awareness. (D5)

Others recalled specific instances in which media broadcasts of the standardised sign language had garnered a degree of recognition for sign language, sparking interest amongst hearing people:

When I was shopping I saw the Sports News on TV and there was a sign language interpreter. Because [sign language] was being shown on TV some people were

interested in it, they came and said, "Hey! There's sign language on TV. It's like the way you communicate!" This was last year when we had ASEAN Para-Games in Myanmar. The news was reporting which teams had won and they included a sign language interpreter for it. So, the hearing people were telling me, "Hey! It's like you guys." So, there are times that people take an interest in sign language. (D23)

Now our country has opened up a bit, people know more things now and knowledge has sort of started to spread in a way. So people have even started to see sign language on the news. I have to tell them, 'OK, so that's sign language', and then they ask 'Oh! Is it really like that?' (P3)

Despite the community's emphasis on safeguarding YSL from outside influences and ensuring its continued vitality (as described in Chapter 6), participants did not appear concerned that it was the standardised language and not YSL that was attracting public attention on TV. In fact, it seemed that members of the younger generation regarded the broadcasting of the standardised language as a heuristic for achieving cultural and linguistic citizenship, conferring status on signed languages in general, legitimising deaf community life and encouraging interaction and dialogue between hearing society and deaf communities. By fostering greater societal awareness and acceptance in this way, it could be argued that broadcasting the standardised language in fact supports the vitality of YSL, affirming deaf people's right to use their own language in the public sphere, freely and without prejudice.

## **7.8. Unofficial community policy regarding the standardised sign language**

Certainly, while a number of deaf people expressed interest in learning the standardised language, they did not consider that it would infringe on community interactions. An unofficial language policy appeared to operate within the community as many participants stated that YSL would remain the language of everyday interaction in the Yangon deaf community as well as the Mary Chapman School, with the standardised language reserved for use in formal domains such as the media or national conferences.



To this extent, the community appeared to envisage a classically diglossic situation, with YSL and the standardised sign language occurring in strict functional complementarity (see Ferguson, 1959). As one participant stated after describing the importance of learning the standardised language in order to access the media:

There are two types of sign language. There are the regional sign languages that people use amongst themselves to communicate, and there is also the standardised sign language that is the same for the whole of Myanmar. So you should know both of them, the standardised sign language as well as your own language. (*D19*)

For Keller (1982), functional complementarity supports linguistic stability and thus language maintenance. Moreover, with reference to language standardisation, Tulloch (2008) notes that local linguistic varieties are more likely to be preserved and perpetuated when the standard form is viewed as an addition to the community's linguistic repertoire, reserved for use in domains in which the local dialect has not previously been used. In such cases Fishman (1991, p. 364) states that:

[T]he standard comes not to displace or replace the dialects, but to complement them in functions which they do not generally discharge and, therefore, in functions that do not compete with their own.

As YSL has never been broadcast in the media or used in other such formal domains, there was little indication that participants considered the standardised language to be a threat to their language. Yet, for Eckert (1980), the power and prestige typically associated with these formal domains invariably encourages assimilation and shift towards the formal variety, with the community language cast as inferior or inadequate (see also Literature Review, section 3.6.2). As Woll (cited in Stamp et al., 2014) observes, broadcasting BSL on television appears to have influenced the lexicon of British Sign Language, with younger signers incorporating these signs into their communicative repertoires. In these relatively early stages of standardisation the long-term results of the project remain unknown. However, at the time of research, functional complementarity between the two languages appeared to be the only ideologically

acceptable outcome of standardisation for young deaf people. Crucially, with language viewed as a product of community experience and inextricably linked to group identity (as described in the preceding chapter), participants emphasised their loyalty to YSL and their strong opposition to using the standardised language for everyday community interactions. As one participant asserted, when reflecting on the impact of the standardised language on community language practices:

It's not like the sign language used in this Yangon area will be used less or will disappear. It will still exist in its own right, separately. We need to respect YSL as it was founded a long time ago and it's still growing. But we will also need to learn the new [standardised] sign language. It's the same for people in Mandalay. (D17)

## **7.9. Raising deaf awareness through the standardised language**

When discussing the awareness-raising potential of the Standardisation Project, members of the younger generation referred to the significance of the standardised sign language handbook. In particular, participants drew attention to the way in which the publication of the standard signs had created new possibilities for interacting with hearing people, in which hearing people acquiesce to deaf people's preferred mode of communication. As one participant described:

I've met hearing people who have this book and then they try to communicate with us using those signs from the book. I think it's very good for the hearing people to learn sign language. There are some guests who come here and they've already practiced some of the signs from this book. So when they come they can communicate with us using those signs. (D6)

Another participant recalled an instance in which a hearing person had communicated with him using the standard signs:

D23: The [standard sign language] project used to publish signs in a news journal<sup>47</sup>. I once met a hearing person who came [to the school] and started to

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<sup>47</sup> A number of participants referred to the publication of the standard signs in a newspaper. However, I was not able to find any copies during the fieldwork.

communicate with me by saying ‘How are you?’ [in the standardised sign language]. It was the hearing person who started the communication.

Interviewer: How did you feel when this person introduced themselves in sign language?

D23: I was a bit surprised. It was the first time a hearing person had come and started communication with me [in sign language].

Despite widespread dissatisfaction regarding the proportion of Mandalay signs contained within the standardised language, it was notable that only one participant raised concerns that hearing people would be learning these, rather than the YSL equivalents:

When hearing people study this book and use the signs in it then Mandalay people will say ‘Oh, they’re using our sign language’ and the Yangon people will say ‘They’re using Mandalay signs’. There’s kind of a tension between the regions, you know. Because people love their region and if the hearing people are using that sign language [from Mandalay], well... there might be some feelings about that. (D29)

For the majority of participants, however, the prospect of hearing people learning the standardised sign language did not appear to be problematic. In fact, during the early stages of fieldwork it was common for deaf people to show me their copy of the standardised sign language book and encourage me to take it home to study. Similarly, deaf people working in the school handicraft room would often introduce themselves to visitors in the standardised sign language, fetching copies of the book to hand out as gifts. Moreover, on the relatively rare occasion that a hearing person expressed an interest in learning to sign, deaf people would typically refer to the standardised sign language book, pointing to the signs and producing each one in demonstration. Certainly, many of my initial visits to the handicraft room were spent in this way, and it was only when I asked people about their own way of signing and expressed an interest in learning the community language that they started to teach me YSL.

It should be noted that some linguistic minorities are resistant to outsiders learning their language, particularly when there is a strong sense of language ownership amongst community members or a history of oppression (see Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009; Grinevald, 2007; Hill, 2002). However, there was little to suggest that deaf people's decision to teach the standardised sign language to hearing people was a protective mechanism designed to exclude outsiders from learning YSL. As the following quotes illustrate, the decision appeared to be largely a matter of practicality, with the handbook representing a convenient teaching aid:

For the visitors it's difficult for them to communicate with deaf people. They often ask if there's a book that can help them to communicate. When someone asks like that then we give them the book. In this book all three languages [Myanmar Standard Sign Language, Burmese and English] are included, so both foreigners and Myanmar people can use it. That's why we give out the book. There's no problem. It's easy to understand and study from because it includes both Burmese and English. (D6)

D1: With my friends, amongst ourselves, we just use Yangon Sign Language. But if we meet with hearing people and they want to learn sign language then I just teach them with the book. Because they come with the book and then ask us how to sign. I also taught you a bit with that book.

Interviewer: Would you prefer to teach them the signs from the book, or would you prefer to teach them Yangon Sign Language?

D1: I would prefer to teach Yangon Sign Language! This book includes Mandalay Sign Language so it's confusing.

Another participant pointed out that teaching hearing people the standardised sign language was more likely to result in a sustained interest in signing, given that the standardised language would be highly visible in the media:

D5: When [hearing] guests come then we'll use the standardised language, like when we sign 'what's your name' or 'nice to meet you'. So with guests we'll use it, but not with other people from Yangon.

Interviewer: Why do you teach guests the standardised language?

D5: Well, JICA are planning to use it in the media, right. So in the future if people see these signs in the media then they'll already understand it, you know. They might see the sign NAME for example, and think, 'oh yeah, I saw that before'.

As the above quote suggests, deaf people did not necessarily expect to exchange more than basic greetings with hearing people. Indeed, the community tended to have low expectations regarding hearing people's ability to sign, with many participants describing sign language as 'difficult' for hearing people to learn:

Some [hearing people] would like to communicate with us and are keen to learn, but sign language is difficult. They find it hard to learn. (D19)

It's really hard! When I sign and try to teach [hearing people] then they get confused, so I have to write down what the sign means. And then they sign very slowly and find it hard to make the hand shapes. They have to practice a lot, it's really difficult. (D21)

With teaching sign language to hearing people regarded as a particularly challenging task, the standardised sign language book represented a much-needed pedagogical tool and an effective method of introducing sign language to hearing people and initiating interactions with them. Moreover, to the extent that most hearing people were considered unsuited to learning sign language and thus unlikely to achieve fluency, teaching the standardised language to this group may not have been perceived as a threat to the integrity of the community or the vitality of YSL.

In contrast, hearing people who were actively involved in deaf community life were generally expected to attain proficiency in YSL. Not only did deaf people consider this to be a prerequisite for teachers working at the Mary Chapman School (see Chapter 5, section 5.8), but some participants also described the need for sign language interpreters

to be able to work in both the standardised sign language and the regional sign languages of the country:

Interpreters are going to have a lot to learn! The interpreters will need to study the signs from the book on top of Yangon and Mandalay signs! (D29)

There are hearing people who study both the signs from this book and YSL. They're training to be interpreters, so they can't just use signs from this book. They have to know YSL as well. (D28)

Calls for interpreters to be proficient in both the local and the standardised language may relate to the importance attributed to maintaining functional complementarity between the two languages. As described earlier in section 7.8, while many younger participants were willing to learn the standardised language in order to access media broadcasts or participate in national events, YSL was widely regarded as the only acceptable language for local community use. Notably, the two teachers at the Mary Chapman School who also worked as JICA-trained interpreters only ever appeared to use YSL when interpreting for members of the Yangon deaf community. The following fieldnotes describe one deaf woman's attempts to persuade a trainee interpreter to continue using Yangon signs in her future work:

*During an afternoon in the handicraft room a trainee interpreter, who was on placement at the school, stopped in to introduce herself. She described her training with JICA, at one point using a sign that she subsequently explained was the standardised sign language sign for MATHS. At this point a deaf woman came over to join the conversation and she and the trainee interpreter started to list other signs that they used differently. The trainee explained that many of the JICA signs were also used in Mandalay, to which the deaf woman quizzed her on what language she would use after her placement: 'Once you've finished your observation here and have learnt lots of Yangon signs what are you going to do? You're not just going to put them aside and forget about them are you?!'. The trainee promised that she wouldn't.*

## 7.10. The symbolic value of sign language in print

When reflecting on the advantages of the standardisation project, a number of participants from the younger generation remarked on the organisation of the standardised sign language book, enthusiastically describing how the signs were presented alongside their Burmese and English written counterparts. In addition to helping hearing people learn signs, several deaf people considered that this layout allowed them to develop their own written language skills:

I sometimes refer to this book to study as it includes the Burmese sentence, the English sentence and also the signs [...] I can study from it as it includes three languages: Burmese, English and Sign Language. But when I communicate [with Yangon deaf people] I only use my Yangon Sign Language. (D6)

Interviewer: What do you think of this [standard sign language] book?

D5: I'm interested in it. I like it [...] I like how it's systematically ordered with the signs and the translations into English and Burmese one above the other. That's interesting. When I want to communicate in written language I can look up the signs and then copy out the words. It's very helpful like that.

Publishing signs and positioning them alongside the Burmese and English translations also serves an important status-raising function, tangibly demonstrating the linguistic parity of signed and spoken languages. As Yamada (2007) notes, minority language learning materials not only provide useful reference tools but can also serve a powerful symbolic function, increasing the prestige of the language. Moreover, for Hadaway and Young (2013), publications in which an endangered and a dominant language are printed in tandem create an impression of linguistic equality while also encouraging a greater understanding of cultural and linguistic diversity. Furthermore, Stokoe (cited in Lucas, 2003, p. 332) asserts that sign language dictionaries can:

show the world that deaf signers can think in their sign languages, with logic and precision and even elegance. [They] can wipe out, as nothing else can so well, the

false ideas that ignorant people have about deaf people and deaf society and sign languages.

The attention given to the distinct grammatical features of signed languages in the standardised sign language handbook may also help to challenge dominant societal misconceptions that have restricted deaf people's social participation. As described in Chapter 2 (section 2.13), the introductory pages of the standardised sign language book provide information on the structure of signed languages, in particular detailing the role of non-manual features. Indeed, a number of deaf people from the younger generation remarked positively on the way in which directions for producing non-manual features were provided alongside many of the sign language entries in the book. As one participant stated:

I like the facial expressions that accompany the signs in the book. If people sign with a blank face, well, deaf people don't like that. (D5)

Another participant considered that the inclusion of non-manual features would help hearing people to recognise and understand the grammatical differences between spoken and signed languages:

D19: The book also includes [sign language] grammar. It shows the facial expressions for each sign and then underneath it has the written translation so that hearing people can understand.

Interviewer: And when you first saw this book, what did you think?

D19: I thought it was very easy to understand. You can really see the grammatical differences between the spoken and signed languages.

By including non-manual features and omitting mouthings the book complements the linguistic preferences of the younger generation and their desire to disassociate from the spoken language (as described in Chapter 6, section 6.13.1). Furthermore, by emphasising these unique structural properties, the standardised sign language book not only presents signed language as equal to spoken language, but also as fundamentally



different. Notably, it is on these same terms that deaf people from the younger generation wish to be accepted in wider society, as they described their desire for linguistic citizenship and a dignified form of social participation that does not require them to forfeit their unique deaf identity (see Chapter 6, section 6.13.4). While the book does not educate hearing people about YSL specifically, it does represent a step towards what Pakulski (1997, p. 80) refers to as ‘the right to symbolic presence and visibility (vs marginalisation); the right to dignifying representation (vs stigmatisation); and the right to propagation of identity and maintenance of lifestyles (vs assimilation)’.

### **7.11. Chapter discussion**

This chapter has examined attitudes towards the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project, presenting an in-depth analysis of the various ways that participants interpreted and negotiated it. Attention was drawn to the agentive role that teachers and community members play in the policy making process.

The chapter also highlighted the benefits of adopting an ethnographic approach in order to understand the specific ways in which official LPP plays out in local contexts. Participants’ perceptions of language standardisation were very much grounded in the realities of community life, influenced by a diverse array of experiences, values, ideologies and agendas. As a result, responses to the Standardisation Project were multifarious, complex and at times conflicting. While deaf people in the older and middle generations were generally opposed to standardisation, members of the younger generation took a more equivocal view of the project. In this way, the findings support Canagarajah’s (2005) assertion that disagreement and tension often accompany LPP, as groups and individuals grapple with competing desires and priorities. Such tensions were pervasive in Yangon where the community defied policy makers and resisted the standardised language for use within the community while also experiencing internal disagreement regarding the exclusion of mouthings from the standardised language.

The most striking conflict of interests, however, was observed at the individual level amongst deaf people from the younger generation as they reflected on the multiple possible outcomes of standardisation. Not only did members of this age group interpret the standardised language as inauthentic and a potential threat to the vitality of YSL and the integrity of the community, but they also regarded it as an opportunity for social participation and a path towards a meaningful form of citizenship. In this way, young deaf people appeared to regard sign language standardisation as an instance of both corpus and status planning. To the extent that young participants attempted to reconcile these competing interests and outcomes, the introduction of the standardised language appeared to have opened up what Hornberger (2005) describes as ‘ideological and implementational spaces’ in the community. As Canagarajah (2005) notes, tension and disagreement regarding language planning and policy can enable communities to reflect on and pursue their own agendas, even in the face of top-down policy that is unjust or oppressive. While the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project aims ultimately for linguistic homogeneity, young deaf people constructed their own policy regarding the use of the standardised language, demanding functional complementarity in order to protect and promote their various interests.

## **Chapter 8: Conclusion**

### **8.1. Introduction**

I embarked on this research project with the aim of understanding community responses to Myanmar Standard Sign Language. Since the government initiated the project in 2007, the development and uptake of the standardised language appears to have been relatively slow. Nevertheless, as I described in Chapter 2, the government continues to actively promote its use, allocating additional funding to the interpreter training programme, and developing educational materials. The Ministry of Social Welfare also continues to urge teachers at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf to use the standardised language in the classroom.

As noted in Chapter 2, the government has framed standardisation as a way of promoting deaf people's social participation, yet the project takes place against a historical backdrop of assimilationist LPP in which successive Myanmar governments have worked to suppress linguistic diversity in spoken languages. Moreover, community consultation during the process of sign language standardisation was found to be very limited, with only a select few deaf people invited to participate in the development of the language. By adopting a critical ethnographic methodology I sought to produce a 'deaf centred' account of language planning and policy, attending to deaf people's opinions of the standardised sign language and examining the ways in which this top-down policy interacts with local language practices and ideologies.

As described in the Methodology chapter, the inductive progression of the study led me to pursue avenues of enquiry that extended beyond my initial research questions. While these questions helped guide my research during its early stages, I came to realise that community responses to standardisation were closely linked to unofficial local language policies, which were themselves embedded in a complex and intersecting web of language ideologies, social experiences and broader cultural paradigms. Accordingly, I

conducted a detailed and holistic analysis of LPP in the Yangon deaf community that was presented over three core findings chapters: Language in Education Policy at the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf; Unofficial Community Language Planning and Policy; and Community Responses to the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project.

In this concluding chapter I discuss the key findings that have emerged from the research and reflect on both their wider theoretical significance and their implications for research methodology and policy implementation. Throughout the discussion I refer back to the literature I reviewed in Chapter 3, demonstrating the way in which my findings build on this body of work and contribute to key scholarly debates. The discussion is presented over two main sections. In the first, I reflect on my analysis of community language ideologies and the wider theoretical implications of these findings. I also consider the benefits of extending the scope of my ethnographic analysis beyond language ideologies to account for the wider framework of beliefs that also influence LPP outcomes. In the second section of the discussion I consider how my research contributes to ongoing scholarly debate regarding the interplay between LPP and social justice, reflecting on the topics of mother-tongue education and language rights. In particular, I highlight the need to discuss linguistic inequality within its wider socio-political context. I then briefly consider the future of LPP in the Yangon deaf community before describing some limitations of the study and suggesting areas for further research.

## **8.2. An ethnographic analysis of language ideologies: theoretical contributions and insights**

In Chapters 1 and 3, I described a growing scholarly interest in adopting an ethnographic approach to LPP research and I presented my rationale for selecting this methodology. In particular, I referred to the significance that the ethnographic model attributes to community language ideologies, as researchers attempt to understand the ways in which language users ‘create, contest, and mediate LPP at multiple levels – micro, meso, and macro’ (Hornberger and Johnson, 2011, p. 285). In the following discussion I reflect on my analysis of language ideologies and the various theoretical insights that arise from my findings.

A key finding to emerge from this study was that language ideologies and, in particular, ideologies of linguistic authenticity, comprised a central component of unofficial language policy in the Yangon deaf community. Analysis of these ideologies was a primary focus of Chapter 6 and offered considerable insight into the particularities of LPP in the community. In the discussion that follows I reflect on the wider theoretical significance of my analysis and its implications. I describe how my findings contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and rigorous sociolinguistic theory of authenticity. I then consider how my findings shed light on community conceptualisations of language, noting their divergence from the dominant structuralist model and the ramifications of this for sociolinguistic research. Having addressed the wider implications of these findings, I then describe how my analysis has explicated the specific relationship between language ideologies and local LPP in the Yangon deaf community. While it is widely acknowledged that language ideologies influence local language policies, my findings in Chapter 6 suggest that the reverse is also true; language ideologies and policies appeared to be mutually constituted as deaf participants worked towards specific social and political goals.

### **8.2.1. Destabilising dominant epistemologies**

As I described in Chapter 3, there has been a lack of clarity regarding the semantics of linguistic authenticity, with scholars often relying on essentialist assumptions that emphasise the importance of ancestral language (see Bucholtz, 2003; Eira and Stebbins, 2008). By attending to the ‘process of authentication’ as it occurs within the Yangon deaf community my findings have helped to challenge this perspective, demonstrating that authenticity is a locally specific social construction (Bucholtz, 2003; Coupland, 2003; Pietikäinen et al., 2016). Indeed, analysing this process within a young urban deaf community makes a particularly rich contribution to the literature; as Eira and Stebbins (2008) assert, it is necessary to examine processes of authentication across a range of linguistic contexts, particularly where non-traditional social arrangements undermine the value of historicity. My findings showed that deaf people in Yangon did not valorise the longevity of signs. Instead, they drew on locally relevant narratives of authenticity, which

focused primarily on the process of sign development, rather than the resulting signs. In this way, participants described the authenticity of signs that had developed as a result of local deaf interactions, and thus embodied the unique experiences and perspectives of the community.

These findings illustrate the disparity between dominant and community ideologies of authenticity, and highlight the disjunction between official and local conceptualisations of language itself. As described in the Literature Review, the dominant structural view of language is often inconsistent with community epistemologies of language. Findings presented in Chapter 6 demonstrate that, instead of regarding YSL as an extant and fixed entity, deaf people emphasised the fluid, evolving nature of the language and its symbiotic relationship with the community. In a further striking departure from the structuralist model of language, I also found that participants valorised iconic signs, celebrating their capacity to physically encapsulate community experiences. Sign language research, however, has traditionally dismissed the prevalence and significance of iconic signs in a drive to demonstrate the bona fide status of sign languages<sup>48</sup> (Taub, 2001; Branson and Miller, 2007; Cuxac and Sallandre, 2010; Perniss et al., 2010). As Armstrong (cited in Branson and Miller, 2007) states, the emphasis that structural linguistics places on arbitrariness rendered iconicity ‘taboo’. Indeed, Cuxac and Sallandre (2010) point out that iconicity is still often regarded an obstacle to recognizing sign languages as genuine languages.

While the development of sign language research helped diversify the field of linguistics and offer validation to many deaf communities (Ladd, 2003), my findings suggest that attempts to normalise sign languages and prove their legitimacy may, in fact, delegitimise what deaf people in this study considered to be defining features of their language. On the basis of this finding I suggest, in common with Branson and Miller (2007), that uncritically imposing conventional linguistic models onto sign languages may constitute a form of ‘epistemic violence’. As Cuxac and Sallandre (2010) note, traditional adherence to the structural model of language presented an impoverished image of sign

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Frishberg, 1975; Hoemann, 1975; Klima and Bellugi, 1979.

language. For Branson and Miller (2007), rather than attempting to normalise sign languages (and other seemingly exceptional languages such as Creoles), researchers should work to destabilise dominant epistemologies of language through their research. To this extent, the growing body of research into iconicity that has emerged in the last decade represents a welcome departure from the structuralist tradition (see, for example, Cuxac and Sallandre, 2007; Ormel et al, 2009; Perniss et al., 2010; Perniss and Vigliocco, 2014; Ochinno et al., 2017). This burgeoning field of study has both epistemological and social significance, presenting a more inclusive theoretical model that has the ability to challenge and expand our current understanding of language. In addition, Makoni and Pennycook (2007) emphasise the need to ‘disinvent and reconstitute’ received notions of language by attending to local community understandings. By examining community conceptualisations of language and authenticity, and by placing them at the centre of my research, my findings contribute to this larger project of critical deconstruction.

In keeping with this critical approach to research, I made a decision not to adopt the prevailing orthographic convention of distinguishing between Deaf and deaf identities (see Chapter 1, section 1.6). While this binary categorisation has served to generate awareness of alternative deaf experiences and is conceptually useful to a point, my findings add further weight to the growing body of work that critiques this convention; as described in the Introduction chapter, a growing number of scholars suggest that this practice is overly simplistic and potentially divisive. While all deaf participants in this study identified as members of the Yangon deaf community, they did not appear to share a single cohesive deaf identity. Specifically, members of the younger generation tended to describe their identity in ways that closely mirror the cultural-linguistic model of deafness as described in the Deaf Studies literature (see for example Mindess, 2014; Ladd, 2003; Padden and Humphries, 1988). However, for members of the older generation, using sign language did not appear to be as important to their identity, and their views regarding deaf people’s place in the social world also differed. To impose the binary Deaf/deaf classification would have risked homogenising these multiple experiences and understandings of deafness in the community, obscuring the ways in which these identities relate to shifting educational, political and social contexts.

### **8.2.2. The political function of local language ideologies**

In addition to challenging received notions of authenticity and language, my analysis also drew attention to the community-specific social and political functions that were served by these ideologies. Notably, a precise understanding of this relationship would not have been possible without treating authenticity as a localised social construction.

As I described in Chapter 6, participants typically mobilised ideologies of authenticity as they worked to protect their language against the perceived threat of lexical borrowing. Yet this did not imply an outright conservatism vis-à-vis language change. Indeed, another finding of interest was that these same narratives of authenticity were also evoked in order to legitimise the language change that resulted from peer-to-peer language transmission at the Mary Chapman School. In this way, my analysis demonstrated how ideologies of authenticity serve multiple functions, offering the community protection against unwanted outside intrusions while also helping to shore up in-group solidarity by encouraging a philosophy of unity in linguistic diversity. Moreover, as these ideologies were articulated by deaf people most often as prescriptive statements regarding language use, my findings further suggest that language ideologies do not simply influence policy, as has been the focus in the LPP literature; policy may also shape language ideologies, raising them to the level of consciousness where they are then developed in the pursuit of specific group interests (see also McCarty, 2011b).

### **8.3. Extending the scope of study: exploring local models of citizenship: unraveling ambivalent attitudes**

While language ideologies offered particularly rich material for analysis, my findings also highlighted the limitations of focusing on them exclusively in LPP research; it was only by examining certain broader cultural paradigms that I was able to develop a more comprehensive analysis of LPP and account for some of the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions in my research findings. As I noted in the Literature Review, community language ideologies are manifold, complex and often conflicting (see Austin and Sallabank, 2014; Irvine and Gal, 2000; Kroskrity and Field, 2009; Woolard, 1998). This study provided further evidence of this heterogeneity and the potential for discord.



While ideologies of authenticity were widely shared amongst deaf participants, my findings also revealed tensions in the community. In particular, I found that Burmese mouthings represented a point of contention between the older and younger generations. Moreover, the lack of inter-generational tolerance on this issue stood in stark contrast to the community's polynomic philosophy (Jaffe, 1999) and their general commitment to unity in linguistic diversity. Community responses to the standardised sign language were also disparate: deaf participants from the older generation appeared to have little interest in standardisation, while members of the younger generation tended to oscillate between outright rejection and cautious acceptance. This ambivalence amongst younger signers was somewhat unanticipated, standing in contrast to community ideologies of authentic language and the widespread resistance to using exogenously developed signs.

These apparent contradictions in fact proved to be valuable points for analysis, and as I worked to understand the logic behind these tensions I came to realise that participants' language ideologies interacted with their views on citizenship and equality in complex and dynamic ways. Crucially, my analysis showed that the younger and older generations held distinct views on citizenship, which appeared to stem from their divergent educational and life experiences. In turn, these views and experiences were found to influence each generation's view of Burmese mouthings and also shape responses to the standardised language, as participants negotiated their sometimes conflicting beliefs, interests and priorities. This finding was critical to my understanding of LPP in the community and draws attention to the benefits of adopting a more comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to LPP research. Although it is widely acknowledged that LPP decisions form part of a broader discussion on citizenship, equality and social participation (see Stroud, 2001; McCarty, 2011b; and Jaffe, 2011) there has been a tendency to focus analysis overwhelmingly on language ideologies. As a consequence, relatively little attention has been given to community conceptualisations of citizenship or other locally salient cultural paradigms that may also have a bearing on LPP. As Spolsky (2004) states, while a focus on language is understandable, 'linguicism' and a failure to attend to issues beyond language may result in a myopic analysis (see also Orman, 2008).

A further significant finding in this respect was that participants judged standardisation in terms of a process with multiple outcomes. Consequently, the project provoked conflicting responses, as participants assessed each aspect of it according to their various language ideologies and wider beliefs about citizenship. For example, in Chapter 7 I described how participants did not regard the concept of a standardised sign language as being inherently problematic, yet they did have concerns about the process of standardisation and the way in which the standard signs had been developed. A particular problem was that the standardised language had been created without the formation of a national deaf community, rendering it incompatible with participants' ideologies of authentic language development. However, the status-raising potential of the standardised language was found to chime with the younger generation's views on citizenship and equality, and was thus cautiously embraced by this section of the community.

These findings draw attention to an oversight within the LPP literature. As I described in the Literature Review, LPP has traditionally been categorised as either corpus or status planning, with only limited acknowledgement of the close relationship between the two (see Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2004). My findings suggest that this dichotomous approach to classification may hinder the analysis of community responses to LPP; by obscuring the complexity of policy outcomes, researchers may misinterpret disparate community responses to LPP as inconsistent or contradictory. Young deaf people in Yangon perceived sign language standardisation as an example of both corpus and status planning, and their responses varied accordingly. Another key finding that emerged from this line of enquiry was that young deaf people formulated their own grass-roots language policy regarding the use of the standardised language, negotiating and ultimately reconciling their competing interests and beliefs. In this way, the multifaceted process of sign language standardisation appeared to have opened up 'ideological and implementational spaces' in the community (see Hornberger, 2005).

#### **8.4. Interim summary**

These findings demonstrate the benefits of an ethnographic approach to researching LPP, while also highlighting the need to go beyond language ideologies and attend to the broader cultural beliefs that operate in the community. Although issues relating to language were the primary focus of my research, an interdisciplinary approach was fundamental to the development of my theoretical framework. In this way I was able to demonstrate the web of ideologies, beliefs, priorities and concerns that influenced local LPP, and thus reach a clearer understanding of the complex ways in which official LPP was interpreted, negotiated and at times subverted by the community.

#### **8.5. The interplay between LEP and social justice**

As I noted in the Literature Review, education is widely regarded as one of the most significant domains in which LPP is enacted, with teachers being crucial to the outcomes of official top-down LPP whilst also acting as de-facto language policy makers in their own right (e.g. Lo Bianco, 2010; Ricento and Hornberger, 1996; Spolsky, 2004). My findings provide further evidence of the central role that educators play in LPP. Language in education policy at the Mary Chapman School was key to my analysis; findings presented in Chapter 5 not only demonstrated the mechanics of classroom language policy, but also highlighted the far-reaching influence that LEP has had on official and unofficial LPP in the deaf community. For example, I found that deaf people's attitudes towards Burmese mouthings, their views on the use of YSL in public and their responses to standardisation could all be traced back to their experiences of LEP at the school. Furthermore, as I described in Chapter 7, teachers were found to play a significant role in determining the success of standardisation, as they generally resisted government calls to adopt the standardised sign language.

In addition, my analysis of the school's language policy contributes to ongoing scholarly discussion regarding the interplay between LEP and social justice. As I described in the Literature Review, although mother-tongue education is often portrayed as a panacea for linguistic inequality, some scholars have argued that schools are in fact destined to

reproduce dominant socio-political structures. My analysis of LEP at the Mary Chapman School suggests that both perspectives are, ultimately, deficient. In the following sections I present key findings from my analysis of LEP and reflect in greater detail on the contributions they make to this area of scholarly debate.

### **8.5.1. The primacy of teacher-student interactions**

As I described in the Literature Review, calls for mother-tongue education typically stem from a broader desire for social, cultural and political equality. Yet, in contrast to these political aims, discussions regarding the implementation of mother tongue programmes have been overwhelmingly technocratic, focusing on the development of appropriate learning materials and training courses, with scant attention being given to the power structures that ultimately underpin linguistic marginalisation and inequality (Heller and Martin-Jones, 2001b; Stroud, 2001). My findings also point to the inadequacy of this approach.

At the Mary Chapman School there appeared to be very little focus on the development of educational materials or training courses, with financial constraints most likely prohibiting the development of these resources. Instead, I found that teachers entered into dialogue with their students in order to overcome the challenges of teaching in YSL. This was a key finding, demonstrating how the shift from oralism to using YSL as the medium of instruction appeared to have engendered a new cultural politics in the school, conferring legitimacy onto YSL and deaf culture, reconfiguring student and teacher identities, and dismantling traditionally asymmetric power structures in the classroom. I described how students experienced a form of linguistic and cultural citizenship in the classroom (Stroud, 2001) and I drew further parallels to the concepts of third space and deliberative democracy in my analysis of these interactions (see Chapter 5).

The above analysis is not intended to undermine the importance of classroom language resources or training opportunities. As the literature emphasises, inadequate learning materials and insufficient training can frustrate efforts to teach in the local language, and my findings in Chapter 5 showed further evidence of this. Nevertheless, Chapter 5 also

drew attention to the primacy of teacher-student interactions when implementing LEP. As Bartolomé (1994) states, it is the democratic process of negotiation and collaboration that decolonises the classroom and promotes equality, as opposed to specific teaching methods or policy interventions (see also Cummins, 2000; Gutiérrez et al., 1999). Similarly, on the basis of my findings, I propose that mother-tongue education per se does not necessarily lead to equality and that the tendency to focus on the technicalities of policy implementation is misguided, abstracting language from its socio-political context. Furthermore, the view that schools are bound to reproduce dominant marginalising power structures (as described in the Literature Review, section 3.8.1) appears to be equally flawed, denying the agentic potential of teachers and students. Crucially, my analysis suggests that these two opposing perspectives on mother-tongue education and equality are both ultimately deterministic and neglect the significance of human relationships in the classroom. To the extent that student-teacher interactions were found to be crucial in dismantling asymmetric power structures and challenging hegemonic social understandings of deafness and sign language, my findings point to the importance of attending to these micro-level interactions when studying or implementing LEP.

## **8.6. Community visions of equality and citizenship: bringing new political schemas to the scholarly forum**

I also found that the community did not refer to language rights when discussing linguistic equality. As I described in the Literature Review, the rights model has become ubiquitous over the last three decades, informing the majority of campaigns for linguistic equality. However, findings presented in Chapter 6 drew attention to a range of factors at both local and national levels that have inhibited the Yangon deaf community's adoption of a rights-based approach to equality. Instead, I found that deaf people's school-time experiences appeared to influence their conceptualisations of equality and their expectations for full societal citizenship. Accordingly, I described how members of the older generation, who had been educated under oralism, considered competence in spoken Burmese to be a pre-requisite for social participation. In contrast, young deaf people appeared to draw on their distinct experiences in the classroom, expressing a desire to generate greater linguistic and cultural awareness by entering into dialogue with

hearing society. Notably, this approach to equality bears striking resemblance to the concepts of linguistic citizenship and deliberative democracy, which focus on voice, agency, dialogue and negotiation (see Literature Review, section 3.10). Moreover, this transformative model of equality was shown to circumvent a number of fundamental problems associated with the language rights paradigm. As I described in the Literature Review, a rights-based approach relies on dominant and essentialising definitions of language, marginalising alternative linguistic practices and ideologies as a result. In contrast, young deaf people considered the ability to define themselves and their language as the key to equality. To this extent, I hope this research project may have contributed to this political goal by presenting participants with a platform for expressing their linguistic identities and challenging hegemonic beliefs.

The above findings contribute to a nascent body of empirical studies that examine how concepts such as citizenship, equality and rights interact with local socio-linguistic realities (see Boynton, 2014; Freeland, 2013; Freeland and Patrick, 2004; Jaffe, 2011). In particular, my findings have drawn attention to the central role that community organisations, including schools, can play in promoting local models of participation, equality and empowerment. As Rocco (2000) states, community experiences within civil society may inspire new modes of citizenship and strategies for political inclusion. However, with language rights dominating scholarly discussions on equality, there has been little consideration given to the way in which community practices may generate local models of equality and an alternative set of discursive resources for challenging linguistic discrimination. My findings help to bridge this gap in the literature.

Crucially, my analysis points to the need for a more critical approach to LPP that questions the assumed moral imperative of interventions such as mother-tongue education and language rights. It is true that scholarly work in this area is compelling, drawing attention to linguistic inequality and offering a powerful moral discourse against oppressive monolingual policies (Orman, 2008; Pennycook, 2006). However, as Orman (2008) asserts, normative ethical discussions of this kind are not necessarily conducive to academic rigour. Similarly, Pennycook (2001) describes how a more critical approach to

research, based on problematising foundational concepts such as ‘language’, ‘mother tongue’ and ‘equality’, and demonstrating scepticism towards universalist approaches to equality, can enrich and enliven research findings (see also Ricento, 2006a). By investigating community ideologies and language practices, my ethnographic study of language planning and policy in the Yangon deaf community invites fresh reflection on dominant ideologies and discourses, bringing new questions, concerns, and political schemas to the scholarly forum.

### **8.7. What next for LPP in the Yangon deaf community?**

This thesis has presented a comprehensive analysis of LPP across multiple and intersecting levels in the Yangon deaf community. However, I do not necessarily consider my findings to hold predictive value regarding the future of LPP in this community. As McCarty (2011, p. 2) states, LPP is ‘processual, dynamic, and in motion’. Likewise, the ideologies and beliefs that inform LPP are themselves in a state of flux, engaged in constant dialogue with the social world and evolving in response to ever-changing circumstances.

In Myanmar these circumstances are changing with particular rapidity. As I described in Chapter 2, the recent and ongoing transition to democracy has resulted in myriad changes to the country’s socio-political landscape. For example, since 2011 the country has undergone extensive modernisation and been subject to sweeping reforms; the government has engaged in fresh debate regarding the role of language in the country, and increasing numbers of NGOs have entered the country, bringing with them new humanitarian and developmental agendas. Since I concluded my fieldwork in Autumn 2015 change in the country has continued apace. In addition, the government has continued to work on the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project, training support workers, producing language learning materials and introducing standard sign language interpreters on the evening news (as described in Chapter 2). These radical changes will influence LPP in complex, dynamic and unpredictable ways, as the community continues to negotiate its place within a shifting socio-political landscape.

## 8.8. Limitations of the study

In addition to highlighting the contributions this research project has made it is also important to reflect on the limitations of the study.

The findings presented are based on numerous interviews, focus groups and informal conversations with members of the Yangon deaf community and other community stakeholders. My analysis does not, however, include accounts from official policy makers and this could be regarded as a limitation. For example, Johnson (2013) suggests that ethnographic LPP research should include the creators of policy in its analysis. Certainly, this would have added another dimension to my findings. However, conducting fieldwork in Myanmar imposed very real restrictions on my research activities. While government controls have relaxed significantly since the country began its transition to democracy (see Chapter 2), I did not consider talking to government officials to be practicable. As Selth (2010) notes, very few government officials in Myanmar are willing to grant interviews. Furthermore, those who do speak with researchers tend to adhere to the official government line. Personal communication with fellow Myanmar scholars suggests that little has changed in this respect. Consequently, I decided not to pursue what would likely have proved to be a fruitless avenue of enquiry.

My decision to focus solely on the Yangon deaf community and not conduct research in Mandalay could also be viewed as a limitation. Although ethnographic research has conventionally focused on a single site of investigation, multi-sited ethnography has become increasingly common (Marcus, 1995)<sup>49</sup>. Indeed, Johnson (2013, p. 145) states that ‘the multi-layered and multi-sited nature of policy necessitates multi-sited research’ (see also Hornberger and Johnson, 2011). Expanding the geographic scope of my research to include the Mandalay deaf community would have allowed me to develop a more complete account of the sign language standardisation project. However, a number of practical factors, including limited time and funding, led me to restrict my research to a single field site. Furthermore, the Mary Chapman School’s NGO status offered me a level

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<sup>49</sup> See McCarty et al. (2011) and Canagarajah (2011) for examples of multi-sited ethnographic LPP research.



of freedom that would not have been possible in Mandalay's government run deaf school, where all visitors must first obtain government approval. For these reasons I decided to focus on developing a rich and in-depth case study of LPP in the Yangon deaf community, rather than a broader and more descriptive account of LPP across both cities.

The protracted nature of ethnographic fieldwork may, in fact, constitute a further limitation of the study, diminishing the relevance of my findings to current policy discussions. As I noted above in section 8.8, the findings presented in this thesis may not reflect LPP as it occurs in the community today. In recognition of the fast-moving nature of policy, Walford (2002) suggests that ethnographic research may be too slow to contribute to ongoing policy discussions. Accordingly, he describes a political and moral imperative to conduct a 'compressed' form of ethnography, characterised by short bursts of data collection, which are written up in turn (see also Johnson, 2013).

As my literature review revealed, LPP research has a strong activist tradition with a commitment to promoting policies that overcome linguistic exploitation and oppression (see McCarty, 2011b; Hornberger and Johnston, 2011; Tolleson, 2006). However, Walford's concept of 'compressed' ethnographic research raises questions regarding the balance between this ethical commitment and the need for academic rigour (a dilemma briefly discussed above in section 8.7 of this Chapter). Reflecting on this research project, I acknowledge that my findings may have limited capacity to contribute directly to ongoing policy discussions. Yet, as Thomas (1993) asserts, meaningful action is only possible when dominant and repressive modes of thought are identified and challenged (see also the Methodology chapter). In this way, I consider that my prime ethical responsibility as a LPP researcher is to produce an in-depth, critical and engaged analysis of LPP issues through sustained collaboration with the community. Moreover, I remain hopeful that my findings will provide a strong point of reference for future studies, including those with a more activist orientation.

## 8.9. Future research

The above discussion suggests a number of potential opportunities for future research, including follow-up studies of LPP in the Yangon deaf community and an ethnographic study of LPP in the Mandalay deaf community. Indeed, it would be valuable to conduct comparative ethnographic LPP research projects in deaf communities in other countries, particularly in the developing world. As Kusters (2011) notes, Deaf Studies is limited by its Western bias and ethnocentric framework. Similarly, although ethnographic LPP research has covered a broad geographic area, the almost exclusive focus on spoken language communities has effectively excluded deaf sign language communities from the scholarly LPP discussion. More comparative studies of LPP across a diverse range of deaf communities would facilitate richer theory building and more representative scholarly discussion in both academic fields.

Smaller scale studies could focus profitably on the annual lexical development workshop at the Mary Chapman School, which I was unable to attend due to the timing of my research. This workshop was often referred to during interviews and was described in terms of a highly politicised process of negotiation between hearing teachers and deaf alumni. Further research into this aspect of LPP could shed light on the ideologies that inform this process. In addition, the YSL dictionary project, which was established soon after I left the field (see Chapter 2), offers further opportunities to explore community-based LPP.

With no previous research into sign language and deaf life in Myanmar, there are a wealth of opportunities for pursuing further studies that extend beyond the field of language planning and policy. My ethnographic methodology and inter-disciplinary approach has highlighted several potential new avenues for enquiry. For example, in Chapter 6, I briefly described the school's role in fostering more positive parental attitudes towards their child's deafness. Furthermore, experiences of transitioning to the mainstream secondary school were commonly shared by deaf interview participants and represented a point of particular concern in the community. Research into these issues

would be valuable topics for future investigation, contributing to a deeper understanding of deaf life in the city.

Finally, there is a pressing need to document and describe Myanmar's existing sign languages, as the Myanmar Sign Language Standardisation Project continues to present a threat to their vitality. Moreover, as YSL evolves with each new generation of students, and as the first cohort of Mary Chapman Students reach old age, it is crucial that inter-generational varieties of YSL are recorded for posterity. This is particularly important given the high value that deaf people attribute to lexical variation. A documentation of YSL could serve a variety of additional purposes, offering rich material for linguistic analysis, particularly within the fields of descriptive linguistics and linguistic typology (see Austin, 2010; Himmelmann, 2006). More significantly, a comprehensive record of the language would support the community in any future attempts to develop learning and training materials, thus contributing to the continued vitality of YSL.

### **8.10. A final reflection**

This study has presented an in-depth analysis of LPP in the Yangon deaf community and has made a number of theoretical and methodological contributions to the academic fields of language planning and policy and Deaf Studies. Throughout the thesis I have highlighted the significance of YSL to the Yangon deaf community, describing its relationship to group identity and reflecting on the implications of this for language planning and policy. At the same time, my findings have also drawn attention to the importance of pushing disciplinary boundaries and looking at issues beyond language in LPP research and theoretical discussion.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Participant metadata

#### Deaf people<sup>50</sup>:

Participant ID code	Age	Gender	Born in Yangon?	Age when started Mary Chapman school	Age at becoming Deaf	Deaf family members?	Other comments
D1	18	F	No	5	Deaf at birth	No	
D2	18	F					
D3	18	F	No	6	Unknown	No	
D4	18	F					
D5	20	M	No	9	Deaf at birth	No	
D6	21	M	No	Between 4 -6 years	Deaf at birth	No	
D7	21	F					
D8	21	M	No	Unknown	Unknown	No	
D9	22	M	No			No	
D10	23	F	No	Unknown	Unknown	No	

<sup>50</sup> Occasionally participants were uncertain of the answers to these questions. On two occasions whilst conducting focus groups power cuts meant that sections of data were not recorded.

D11	23	M	No	Around 5	Unknown	No	
D12	24	F	Yes	About 10	Deaf at birth	No	
D13	25	M	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	One cousin	
D14	25	M					
D15	26	M	Yes	10	Deaf at birth	No	
D16	26	M	No	13	Started to lose hearing aged 3 following illness.	Two siblings	
D17	27	M	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	No	
D18	27	M	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	No	
D19	27	F	No	5	Deaf at birth	Two siblings	
D20	28	M	No	Unknown	Deaf at birth	No	Works as a teacher at the Mary Chapman School
D21	28	F	Yes	6	Lost hearing at aged 4 following a medical procedure	No	
D22	29	M	No	N/A see comments	Lost hearing aged 11 following illness.	No	Attended mainstream hearing school. Moved to Yangon aged 25 having previously learnt Mandalay sign

							language as an adult at age 20.
D23	29	M	No	10	Deaf at birth	No	
D24	35	M	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	No	
D25	35	F	Yes	7	Lost hearing as a young child following illness	One sister	
D26	36	M	Yes	16	Unknown	No	
D27	45	M	Yes	6	Lost hearing aged 3 following illness.	No	
D28	46	M	No	N/A see comments	Started to lose hearing aged 12	Six siblings.	Grew up outside of Yangon and attended mainstream hearing school there. Moved to Yangon and learnt YSL as an adult.
D29	48	F	No	Around 5	Deaf at birth	Two sisters	Works as a teacher in the school's handicraft room.
D30	48	M	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	One brother	
D31	49	M	Yes	8	Deaf at birth	One brother	

D32	52	F	Yes	N/A see comments	Lost hearing aged 3 following illness.	No	Attended mainstream hearing school. Came into contact with Yangon deaf community and started to learn YSL as an adult.
D33	54	M	Yes	5	Lost hearing aged 3 following illness.	No	
D34	54	F	Yes	5	Deaf at birth	One brother	Volunteers occasionally in the school's handicraft room.
D35	54	M	Yes	Around 5	Deaf at birth		
D36	60	M	No	6	Lost hearing as a toddler following an accident	No	
D37	61	M	Yes	7	Unknown		
D38	62	M	No	Around 5	Lost hearing as toddler due to illness.	No	
D39	68	F	No	10	Deaf at birth	No	
D40	72	M	Yes	8	Deaf at birth	Four siblings	
D41	79	F	No	5	Deaf at birth	No	

**Teachers:**

Participant ID code	Time at school	Gender
T1	25 yrs	M
T2	18 yrs	F
T3	32 yrs	F
T4	15 yrs	F
T5	7 yrs	F
T6	15 yrs	F
T7	30 yrs	F
T8	7 yrs	F
T9	18yrs	F
T10	36 yrs	F
T11	15 yrs	F

**Parents and carers:**

Participant ID code	Mother/carer	Other comments
P1	Mother	
P2	Mother	
P3	Mother	
P4	Mother	
P5	Mother	
P6	Grandmother	
P7	Mother	
P8	Mother	Child has a cochlear implant
P9	Carer	
P10	Mother	